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Allegiances

ALLEGIANCES

EmberClan

Leader: Echostar- A dark gray she-cat with darker speckles and golden eyes

Deputy: Coldflurry- A gray she-cat with large spots and green eyes

Apprentice, Brightpaw

Medicine Cats: Pinesmoulder- A white tom with light brown patches and dark amber eyes

Warriors:

Patterfoot- A gray she-cat with green eyes and short fur

Robinflutter- A red-brown tabby tom with blue eyes

Leaftrail- A light reddish-brown she-cat with golden eyes and faint tabby stripes

Scarletblaze- A dark red tabby she-cat with blazing golden eyes

Apprentice, Graypaw

Nightstalk- A black tom with spots around his face and golden eyes

Apprentice, Leopardpaw

Quailstep- A light brown she-cat with speckles around her face and green eyes

Cloudsmoke- A speckled white she-cat with brown patches and bright green eyes

Duskglow- A light dusty gray tom with speckles and golden eyes

Darkglimmer- A black she-cat with a round appearance and red-orange eyes

Spottedfire- A ginger she-cat with dark spots, a white underbelly, and dull blue eyes

Apprentice, Darkpaw

Batmask- A ginger tabby tom with a darker mask over his face and light blue eyes

Flamesoot- A tortoiseshell tom with dark green-blue eyes and a distinctive white paw

Ashrain- A black she-cat with lighter spots around her face and light amber eyes

Sootysnow- A white tom with black spots and golden eyes

Apprentices:

Brightpaw- A dark ginger she-cat with a white chest and green-blue eyes

Darkpaw- A lithe tortoiseshell she-cat with dark amber eyes

Leopardpaw- A light brown she-cat with large spots and greenish gold eyes

Bearpaw- A dark brown tom with dark green eyes and small spots around his face

Graypaw- A brownish gray she-cat with golden eyes and spots around her face

Queens:

Charredlog- A red-brown she-cat with darker spotting around her face and blue eyes

(Expecting kits)

Featherglow- A gray she-cat with a darker face and golden eyes

Elders:

Starlingcall- Black tom with golden eyes and a lithe frame

Whisperfoot- Gray she-cat with darker speckles and green eyes

StormClan

Leader: Opalstar- Ginger she-cat with white underbelly and golden eyes

Deputy: Lightspot- Pale gold she-cat with splashes of white and dark golden eyes

Medicine Cats:

Streamspeckle- Pale yellow she-cat with a white face and dark golden eyes

Featherclaw- White she-cat with dark brown eyes and a fluffy tail

Crowpaw- A very dark brown tom with green eyes and a spot of white on his chest

Warriors:

Lionstep- A light golden tom with a white paw and light hazel eyes

Doveflare- A white she-cat with golden flecks around her eyes and dark golden eyes

Apprentice, Starlingpaw

Russetpelt- A reddish tom with a white underbelly and dark green eyes

Cloudspot- A white she-cat with gray patches and striking light-green eyes

Apprentice, Windpaw

Wrensoar- A pure white she-cat with light brown eyes flecked with gold

Rosefoot- A mostly cream red tabby tom with stormy blue eyes

Apprentice, Floodpaw

Smolderspeck- A dark brown-black she-cat with small spots of orange and golden eyes

Sheercliff- A white tom with dark green eyes

Burntsky- A dark red tom with a white underbelly and muzzle and dark green eyes

Smokespot- A dark brown she-cat with white and orange patches and gray-blue eyes

Gingerstripe- A dark ginger tabby she-cat with golden eyes and a white spot over each eye

Apprentices:

Floodpaw- A dark gray tom with grayish blue eyes and fluffy fur

Windpaw- A white she-cat with gray-blue eyes and a gray tail-tip

Starlingpaw- A light brown she-cat with darker spots and dark green eyes

Queens:

Petalspot- A white she-cat with splashes of light red and brown eyes

(Mother to Nightkit)

Rainstorm- A light blue-gray tom with stripes around his face and bright blue eyes

Kits:

Nightkit- A black tom with brown eyes flecked with gold

Elders:

Snowyfoot- A white she-cat with dark golden eyes

Thunderclash- A golden tom with a darker face and brown eyes

Amberglow- A ginger she-cat with a darker spot over one eye and blue eyes

GustClan

Leader: Wanderingstar- A light gray she-cat with gray eyes and large spots and white speckles

Deputy: Ambertail- A dark amber she-cat with blue eyes and long fur

Medicine Cats: Smolderleaf- A dark red-brown tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Coalface- A dark reddish-brown tom with a dark muzzle and brown eyes

Redspot- A white she-cat with red splashes across her flank and dark green eyes

Apprentice, Owlpaw

Rainfoot- A gray she-cat with dark blue-gray eyes and one darker paw

Duskcurrent- A dark gray tom with bright blue eyes and a white muzzle

Galetrot- A dark red tom with a lighter underbelly and light green eyes

Lilacgaze- A light gray she-cat with amber eyes and a purple undertone

Hailtrot- A dark gray tom with a white chest and face and dark blue-gray eyes

Moonash- A gray she-cat with an ashy gray muzzle and paws and dark brown eyes

Eveninghunt- A black tom with a white underbelly and dark green eyes

Graymoon- A light gray she-cat with a half mask of dark gray and blue eyes

Apprentice, Silverpaw

Sunheart- A light ginger she-cat with darker spots around her face and a lighter underbelly

Emberflick- A dark ginger tom with short fur and dark green eyes

Apprentice, Sandpaw

Roseclaw- A light red tabby tom with darker splashes and dark amber eyes

Caridnalfeather- A dark russet tom with bright green eyes and long fur

Fireleap- A light ginger she-cat with speckles along her flank and dark green eyes

Oaktrot- A dark brown tabby tom with lighter spots and amber eyes

Kinkedbrook- A light brown she-cat with some stripes and dark brown eyes

Apprentices:

Sandpaw- A light, dusty tan tabby she-cat with dark green eyes

Silverpaw- A dusty gray she-cat with ivory eyes and a stripe going down her back

Owlpaw- A light brown tom with a few tabby stripes and green-gray eyes

Queens:

Pumpkinpounce- A light ginger tom with some darker spots and dark amber eyes

Kitetrot- A light brown she-cat with a lighter underbelly and dark green eyes

Elders:

Turfear- A light gray tom with darker face stripes and light blue eyes

Brighteyes- A lithe calico she-cat with dark green eyes and long fur

RainClan

Leader: Heatherstar- A purple-gray she-cat with green blue eyes and speckles around her face

Deputy- Basilear- A reddish white tom with cream splashes across his flank and gold eyes

Medicine Cats:

Moonpad- A creamy she-cat with a patch of red across her muzzle and amber eys

Pineflower- A dark brown she-cat with lighter dapples and bright green eyes

Warriors:

Briartrickle- A light gray tom with two spots over his eyes and dark green eyes

Lilytuft- A dark gray she-cat with a lighter face and green eyes

Turtlefoot- A dark ginger tom with large black patches and a white chest with gray-green eyes

Beetleflick- A black she-cat with orange and white splashes across her face and light gray eyes

Smokytail- A white tom with gray patches across his flank and dark amber yes

Dawnpelt- A gray she-cat with a few speckles around her face and

dark green eyes

Riverstride- A dark gray tom with darker patches and gray-green eyes

Nightfang- A black she-cat with a white chest and bright green eyes

Apprentice, Batpaw

Opalclaw- A dark ginger she-cat with a white muzzle and amber eyes

Apprentice, Stonepaw

Foxrun- A russet she-cat with blue eyes and a striped tail

Silverrun- A light gray she-cat dappled with ginger spots with hazel eyes

Hailstep- A dark gray tom with a white patch on his stomach and hazel eyes

Leopardfish- A light golden-brown she-cat with large spots and bright green eyes

Tigerlily- A light ginger tabby she-cat with muddy green eyes and fluffy fur

Apprentice, Driftingpaw

Minnowfin- A dull ginger tom with big ears and amber eyes

Patchedfur- A dilute calico she-cat with green eyes

Sunsetbloom- A dark russet colored tom with a white chest patch and amber eyes

Ripplepelt- A long-furred blue-gray tom with a white face and amber eyes

Apprentices:

Stonepaw- A dark gray tom with dapples and green eyes

Driftingpaw- A brown she-cat with darker spots and a darker face with hazel eyes

Batpaw- A black tom with a white splash across his chest and dark blue eyes

Queens:

Fallingrain- A long furred blue-gray she-cat with muddy green eyes

Elders:

Blossompelt- A long-furred pinkish gray she-cat with forestry green eyes

DawnClan

Leader: Ebonystar- A black she-cat with golden eyes and long fur

Deputy: Sunbeam- A fluffy calico tom with one gold eye and one green

Medicine Cats:

Silentnight- A black fluffy she-cat with a white tail-tip and white speckles with green eyes

Gullclaw- A light gray tom with a white face and underbelly with blue eyes

Warriors:

Scarletstep- A dark russet tom with spots and amber eyes

Spotface- A white tom with a black spot over one eye and blue eyes

Quiethunt- A gray she-cat with a white chest and darker patches with amber eyes

Nightstalk- A lithe black she-cat with bright blue eyes and a white chest

Smokepatch- A white tom with splashes of gray and amber eyes

Leafpatch- A dilute calico she-cat with dull blue-green eyes

Batleap- A black tom with one white paw and amber eyes

Ivystalk- A black she-cat with one amber eye and one blue

Ivorysplash- A dark gray she-cat with splashes of light gray and golden eyes

Falconclaw- light gray tom with a white splash over his muzzle and yellowish-green eyes

Skydapple- A white tom with gray and black spots and blue-green eyes

Mousepatch- A white she-cat with light brown striped patches and golden eyes

Logfur- A light brown tabby tom with dark golden eyes

Ravenfeather- A black tom with golden eyes and a white splash over one eye

Tumbleweed- A fluffy white she-cat with light brown spots and golden eyes

Heathertrot- A creamy she-cat with a light brown face and paws with blue eyes

Pebbleclaw- A fluffy calico she-cat with bright blue eyes

Queens:

Whitesplash- A dark gray she-cat with splashes of white and amber eyes

(Expecting kits)

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1

Darkpaw trailed after her mentor, tail-tip twitching irritably. Dew-covered grass squelched beneath her paws, glowing in the cold gray light that squeezed between the thick treetop canopies that overshadowed the thin forest.

"It's early," the tortoiseshell she-cat muttered, padding after the lithe ginger she-cat in front of her. Spottedfire tipped her head back, eyes glowing with faint annoyance.

"You were the one who wanted to do this, were you not?" she said in a quiet but stern voice, tilting an ear back. Darkpaw grumbled something inaudible.

Darkpaw pinned her ears to her head when they pushed through the trees and into a hollow where the trees thinned and sand lined the ground. Waves lapped smoothly at the shore, turning the sand dark shades of brown. Waiting at the shoreline were two more cats; a dark ginger tabby apprentice and a tall gray she-cat. Spottedfire led Darkpaw up to the cats, their paws leaving shallow tracks in the white sand. When they approached, Spottedfire dipped her head to the gray she-cat.

"Good day, Coldflurry," she said politely, and Coldflurry inclined her head in response.

"As to you, Spottedfire. Let's make this quick, shall we?" Spottedfire nodded before beckoning Darkpaw over.

She took a seat next to her mentor, glaring daggers at the other apprentice. Coldflurry stood up, swishing her spotted tail through the air.

"Today, you two are going to be sparring. It's been a few moons

since your apprenticeship, and me and Spottedfire will be assessing your progress." Darkpaw locked eyes with the other apprentice, lashing her tail. Today she'd show her.

"Good luck, Brightpaw," Coldflurry said, flicking her tail. "And Darkpaw," she added as an afterthought. Darkpaw bit down hard on her lip.

"Three, two, one, begin!" called Coldflurry, and Darkpaw lunged at Brightpaw. Brightpaw easily sidestepped, and Darkpaw shot into the water with a yelp. Brightpaw twisted, lashing her claws across Darkpaw's nose. The tortoiseshell she-cat scrambled to her paws, amber eyes flashing. She snarled with outrage, thrusting a claw at Brightpaw's face. She ducked, and dipped underneath Darkpaw's stomach, thrusting her further into the waves.

Darkpaw's head shot out of the water, gasping for breath. She heaved herself out of the waves but was intercepted by Brightpaw again, who caught her with a quick lash to the side. Darkpaw spun, swinging a paw at her. It missed by a whisker-length, just skimming the tips of Brightpaw's ears. Brightpaw sped behind Darkpaw, leaping onto the she-cat's back. Darkpaw snarled with outrage, twisting over. Brightpaw leaped off just in time, catching Darkpaw's stomach with several fierce lashes. Darkpaw stumbled to her feet again, only to be caught with a claw to her cheek. She panted, unable to keep track of Brightpaw as she danced easily around her opponent. Brightpaw lunged again, but this time she wasn't messing around. She caught the back of Darkpaw's throat in a solid choke-hold, pressing down so hard that Darkpaw gasped for breath, stumbling on her paws. She thrashed her head around, but her breath came shorter and shorter. She finally collapsed to the ground, and Brightpaw relinquished her hold, shoving a paw down on Darkpaw's face.

"That's enough," called Spottedfire, and Brightpaw lifted her paw. Darkpaw narrowed her eyes at Brightpaw, still panting, and the apprentice gave Darkpaw a snarky grin. Darkpaw unsheathed her claws, but Spottedfire laid her tail across Darkpaw's shoulders. "That's enough," she repeated quietly to Darkpaw alone. She hissed with frustration and anger, but she held herself in place as Brightpaw padded over to her mentor, not even winded.

"Let's go back," said Spottedfire softly, and Darkpaw whipped around, holding her chin high as she followed her mentor back to camp.

When they arrived at the massive dormant volcano, Coldflurry was assigning patrols from atop a rocky ledge. Brightpaw was laughing and talking with Leopardpaw and Bearpaw, making gestures that suspiciously resembled a cat falling into an ocean. Darkpaw bit down her rage, scanning the clearing until she spotted the dusty-gray she-cat, sitting along near the base of the volcano.

"Graypaw!" Darkpaw called, trotting over. Graypaw sat up and blinked at her friend.

"You don't look so good," she said softly, tilting her head curiously to the side. "What happened?" Darkpaw scowled.

"It's stupid Brightpaw!" Darkpaw burst out, lashing her tail. "I. Hate. Her."

"You should try to get along," advised Graypaw, curling her tail around her paws. "She's your sister, after all." Darkpaw curled her lip.

"She doesn't see me as her sister, and I don't see her as mine!" she hissed. "Besides, she doesn't care about me. All she cares about is the stupid special treatment that everybody gives her! All because of that stupid pr-"

"Calm down," interrupted Graypaw, resting her paw on one of Darkpaw's. Darkpaw snatched her paw back, glaring at Graypaw. "It's really not such a big deal," continued Graypaw in a calm tone. "You should really try to get over yourself."

"Get over myself?" snarled Darkpaw indignantly. "Get over *yourself*!" She spun, stalking back across the clearing, dark tail lashing. She could feel Graypaw's eyes boring into her back, but she didn't look back. She shoved her way into the trees, ignoring as brambles tugged back on her pelt.

"Stupid Graypaw," she muttered angrily to herself, aiming a vicious

kick at a tree trunk before recoiling in pain with a lot of cursing. "This is all Brightpaw's fault!" She sat near the base of a large oak. "Nobody ever pays attention to me!" She sat there for a few moments, wallowing in her own self-pity. Eventually, she stood up, sighing.

"I'll do some hunting," she decided out loud. "Then nobody can tell me that I'm not doing something for my Clan." She padded up through the forest until she reached a wide river. She followed it upstream, padding over the smooth pebbles and overturned stones. Eventually, she heard the small scufflings of a water vole. She lowered herself to the ground, creeping forward quietly until the squeaks and shuffling grew loud enough to pinpoint the vole's exact location.

She aimed carefully, spotting the rodent between a patch of reeds. She leaped, landing squarely on top of it.

"There!" she exclaimed out loud, tail swishing proudly through the air. "See Brightpaw make a catch like that!" She picked up the vole, padding proudly back towards the direction of camp.

On her way, she caught sudden snatches of conversation between two cats. Dropping the vole, she slipped forward, peering through the undergrowth at the two cats.

She cursed silently to herself. Brightpaw. *Again*. The apprentice seemed to be having a conversation with her mentor; Or, maybe more of the other way around. A crow, three mice, and a squirrel laid in a neat pile next to Brightpaw.

"You did a fantastic job hunting today," purred Coldflurry in a manner much unlike herself. "Simply amazing! Never have I ever had such a skilled and talented apprentice!" Brightpaw giggled a little bit.

"Why, thank you, Coldflurry!" the ginger she-cat purred, green-blue eyes sparkling. Darkpaw nearly screeched in frustration. This was all because of the prophecy! If there had never been a prophecy, none of this ever would have happened! She grit her teeth. Whatever. She didn't care. She spun around to pick up her vole,

which now paled in comparison to the huge amounts of food Brightpaw had managed to get herself. She stalked back to camp, where the sun was just beginning to fall in the rapidly darkening sky.

She dropped the vole in the pile ill-temperedly before climbing up the rocky side of the volcano and slipping into the apprentice's den.

Graypaw, Leopardpaw, and Bearpaw were already asleep. Darkpaw stalked to her nest near the shadowy back of the cave, turning with her back to the entrance. She dropped her chin onto her paws, and closed her eyes until sleep took her away from all her problems.

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2

"But you've gotta admit! Everybody gives her special treatment!" Darkpaw was sitting beneath the apprentice den, where the volcano overshadowed her and Graypaw. Graypaw sighed.

"Maybe. But you also have to admit, she's the best hunter out of all of us. The best fighter, too, as much as Leopardpaw would never admit it. Doesn't she kind of deserve all the attention she gets?" Darkpaw scoffed.

"Oh, sure, she deserves to be complimented excessively at everything she does. She's not even very nice! She's a total jerk." Graypaw frowned sympathetically.

"She can be a little bit of a show-off sometimes, but give her a chance?"

Darkpaw scowled.

"Talk to you later," she grumbled, standing up and padding across camp.

"Don't do anything stupid," Graypaw called after her, and Darkpaw couldn't help but notice an undertone of exasperation in her friend's voice.

"Stupid? *I'm* the stupid one?" Darkpaw muttered to herself, hooking her claws on one of the volcanic ledges. "I'm probably the smartest cat in EmberClan! The smartest cat out of all the Clans!" She paused, forepaws curled over the next ledge as she realized how stupid she sounded. "Maybe not." She trotted across a narrow ledge that curled around the stone and slipped into a dark cavern.

"Pinesmolder?"

"Come in," echoed a voice from the darkness, and Darkpaw pushed her way into the den.

Herbs hung from every available crevice. A chipped-out hole near the roof made for a pleasant skylight. A white tom patched with brown turned his head to blink curiously at Darkpaw. "Are you hurt?" he asked, standing up and padding over to her.

"No, I just have a question," said Darkpaw, tail-tip twitching. "Remember that prophecy thing a few moons back...?" Pinesmolder sighed as if he knew where this was going.

"Again, Darkpaw, I know what I saw." Darkpaw scowled.

"Did the stars *tell* you?"

Pinesmolder frowned. "You know they didn't. But they showed me very clearly."

Darkpaw turned her head away, lashing her tail. Pinesmolder padded up to her, pressing against her side.

"I know it's frustrating," he said softly to her. "But you must be patient. It will all make sense eventually." Darkpaw ignored him, storming out of the den. She half climbed, half slid down the edge of the volcano, only to be met with Spottedfire's disapproving expression.

"Have you been bothering the medicine cat again?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to the side.

"No," muttered Darkpaw untruthfully.

"Go clean the elders' den."

"Why?" exclaimed Darkpaw, whipping her gaze up to meet her mentor's.

"I don't want you lying to me, Darkpaw. Now go."

"But Brightpaw-"

"And I don't want to hear another word about Brightpaw. I'm your mentor, not hers."

"Well, I wish you weren't!" Darkpaw snapped, bristling.

"Darkpaw!" growled Spottedfire. "No patrols for a moon!" Darkpaw opened her mouth to shoot something back, but Spottedfire silenced her with a glare.

"Go," she hissed, and Darkpaw whipped around, storming off.

Darkpaw pawed reluctantly through the bristly moss nest.

"Just take the whole thing out," said Whisperfoot to Darkpaw. "It's coated in thorns."

"It's really not," said Starlingclaw, but Whisperfoot pushed him lightly with a paw. Darkpaw glared at Whisperfoot, and she met her gaze evenly. Eventually, Darkpaw twisted her head away, dragging the moss unceremoniously out of the elders' den. But she paused as she heard Whisperfoot's voice start up again.

"The nerve of her!" exclaimed the old she-cat. Darkpaw dug her claws into the ground. "To think that she's an EmberClan cat- Pfft!"

"Don't be so hard on her," chimed in Starlingclaw. "At least she's not as bad as GustClan."

"Oh, don't even get me started on those fox-hearts! Always talking about how they 'always do the right thing'? As if! *We're* the Clan of right and wrong, not them! And then RainClan! Oh, they really get my blood boiling!"

"Why?" queried Starlingclaw doubtfully. "Aren't they the nice Clan?"

"Well they say they are," growled Whisperfoot. "But then they leave the other Clans to dry whenever we need their help! Selfish little prats! I bet they're just too weak to fight anyone. That's why they have this little pretend game of being 'too nice to do war'. Pssh." Darkpaw leaned in closer, intrigued, but her attention was pulled

away by loud shouts of excitement near the front of the camp.

She turned just in time to see Brightpaw leaving on a patrol, trailed by Bearpaw, Leopardpaw, and Graypaw. *Graypaw*? Darkpaw thought, astonished. She lashed her tail. So that's how it was, huh? Darkpaw grabbed her moss again, dragging it out of camp and muttering angrily to herself.

When she reached the Great River, she flung the moss into it, watching ill-temperedly as it drifted away, twisting around stones and falling apart in the current. She whipped around to stalk back to camp. She didn't want to encounter Brightpaw's patrol; she didn't even want to *look* at them.

When Darkpaw had reached camp and gotten a fresher load of moss from Pinesmolder, she decided to stop and take a break. She didn't care about these stupid duties. She curled a bit of moss into a mossball, and batted it idly between her paws.

"Darkpaw," came a sharp voice from behind her, and Darkpaw rolled her eyes as she glanced up. Spottedfire was standing over her. The ginger she-cat sighed. "You know you're supposed to be working right now."

"I don't care!" hissed Darkpaw.

"Get back to work," growled Spottedifre.

"No," muttered Darkpaw under her breath.

"What was that?"

"I said NO!"

"Be quiet and get to work right now, or there will be consequences!" Darkpaw glared into her mentor's blazing blue eyes before averting her gaze with a growl. She picked up the fresh moss, kicked aside the mossball, and padded back into the Elder's den.

"How are you, Darkpaw?" Darkpaw spun, dropping the old moss that she was dragging out of camp. The sky was beginning to darken, and the sun had dipped below the horizon, painting the

sunset with shades of deep, scarlet red. Darkpaw was almost done. The nursery was the last den she had to clean, and she did not take kindly to being interrupted.

Especially to being interrupted by Brightpaw.

"What do you want, you arrogant toad?" she hissed, lashing her tail. Brightpaw put a paw over her chest, widening her eyes.

"What? I just came to check on my sister!" Her eyes glimmered with what looked like genuine hurt. Darkpaw glared at her disbelievingly.

"Sure you did," she grumbled, bending back down to pick up her moss. Brightpaw slid up alongside her, pressing against Darkpaw's flank.

"I'm sorry for whatever I did, but I'm just trying to be nice, okay?" Darkpaw pulled away.

"Shut up! I know you're lying!"

"Darkpaw!" exclaimed Brightpaw, an expression of offense and hurt on her face. "I would never!" Darkpaw hesitated. In that moment of hesitation, Brightpaw lunged forward, kicking Darkpaw's paws out from under her. Darkpaw yelped as she slid sideways, falling into a thick pile of mud that was left over from the rain a couple of nights ago. Brightpaw roared with laughter before kicking Darkpaw's moss in next to her.

"Oh my stars!" she wheezed. "I can't believe you fell for that!" Red-hot rage filled Darkpaw's vision.

"I hate you!" she yowled, lunging forward and tearing her claws across Brightpaw's side. Caught off guard, the tabby she-cat stumbled back, eyes widening. Darkpaw used the shock to her advantage, slamming her paw into the side of Brightpaw's face so hard the she-cat squeaked with pain.

"Darkpaw!" came a loud and shocked voice from behind the she-cat, and Darkpaw spun. "Brightpaw! What are you doing?" Darkglimmer, the pair's mother, stood over them, eyes wide with

shock.

"She attacked me, Mom!" wailed Brightpaw, dashing over to her mother's side.

"She started it!" exclaimed Darkpaw, bristling defensively.

"Both of you to the leaders' den! March!" The black she-cat pushed the apprentices forward towards the other side of camp. Darkpaw glared furiously at Brightpaw, who glared right back. *I hate you, Brightpaw*! Darkpaw thought as fiercely as she could, willing the thought to be transferred into the mind of her sister. *I hate you!*

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 3

"...So I'll be letting you two off with a warning this time. Is that clear?" Darkpaw nodded reluctantly, tail-tip twitching softly. Echostar gazed at her and Brightpaw for a moment longer before inclining her head. "You may leave," she said at last. Darkpaw hesitated.

"You heard her," said Darkglimmer, nosing Darkpaw forward. "Go on." Darkpaw stood with a small sigh. She wanted nothing more than to collapse headfirst into a comfortable moss nest. She scrambled up the side of the volcano, hauling herself into the apprentice's den. Brightpaw was already snoring in one of the foremost nests, decorated with colorful feathers. Darkpaw moved to her nest in the back, flopping down on her side with a yawn.

"Darkpaw?" asked Graypaw, and Darkpaw glanced up. "What happened?" Darkpaw sighed.

"I got in trouble again."

"What else is new?" said Graypaw jokingly, but she became quiet at Darkpaw's miserable expression. "Look," said the gray she-cat moving over to lay next to Darkpaw. "How about me, you, Leopardpaw, and Bearpaw go out tomorrow? Just the four of us. We don't have to take Brightpaw."

"Really?" murmured Darkpaw, glancing up at Graypaw. "You'd do that for me?"

Graypaw smiled, gaze soft. "Of course," she purred, resting her chin on top of Darkpaw's head. "Now get some sleep, alright?"

Darkpaw snuggled into Graypaw's side, closing her eyes. It was her

friend's quiet purring that lulled her to sleep that night.

The next morning, Darkpaw awoke to Graypaw prodding her in the side. She blinked her eyes open sleepy, yawning.

"Are you ready to go?" Graypaw asked, smiling. Darkpaw shook her head drowsily.

"Oh.. wait, I don't think I can."

Graypaw blinked, confused.

"My mentor banned me from going on any patrols for the next moon, and I think this would apply."

Graypaw shook her head. "No, we've already cleared things up with your mentor. You're good to go."

"Really?" exclaimed Darkpaw happily, bouncing up from her nest and curling her tail. Graypaw nodded with a grin.

"Come on, the others are waiting for us." The two apprentices hopped out of the den, trotting over to where two more apprentices stood together, conversing loudly.

"Hey, Darkpaw," said a light brown spotted she-cat. "Good to talk to you again."

"Hi, Leopardpaw," said Darkpaw politely. "Hi, Bearpaw." Bearpaw turned to her with a small smile.

"Come on!" exclaimed Leopardpaw, grinning at them. "Race you to the Great River!" She dashed off, bounding easily through the undergrowth, and Darkpaw, Graypaw, and Bearpaw rushed to keep up.

The morning chill was just beginning to evaporate, chased away by the rising sun. Wind rushed in Darkpaw's ears as her paws pounded the ground. She brushed past Leopardpaw, grinning wildly. She bounded over a thicket of brambles, landing squarely next to the river. A moment later, Leopardpaw followed her, panting.

"Who let you be so fast?" she joked, trying to catch her breath. Darkpaw laughed breathlessly in response. A few more moments later, Graypaw trotted up to the riverside, followed after a pause by Bearpaw.

"I win!" declared Darkpaw.

"Not so fast!" exclaimed Graypaw, reaching her paw into the river and splashing Darkpaw.

"Hey!" Darkpaw exclaimed, before jumping into the river. Water bubbled in her ears, and she waited for a few moments before pushing up from the gravely river bottom. She exploded out of the water, showering the other apprentices. Leopardpaw made an indignant squeak, tackling Darkpaw back into the water. Graypaw followed a moment later, sending a huge spray over Bearpaw.

Graypaw butted Darkpaw's side playfully, causing her to topple over beneath the water again. She came up sputtering and flicked water at Graypaw's face.

Leopardpaw hauled herself back onto the shore. "Bearpaw's too dry, don't you think?" she called to the other two, who chimed in with agreement.

She grabbed onto Bearpaw's back with her forepaws.

"Hey!" exclaimed Bearpaw, trying to twist backward as Leopardpaw heaved him towards the water.

"In you go!" she laughed, pushing Bearpaw into the river. A moment passed, in which Leopardpaw awaited eagerly to see Bearpaw's reaction, but the tom didn't resurface.

"Bearpaw?" Leopardpaw said, anxiety in her voice. Suddenly, Bearpaw lunged out of the water, grabbing Leopardpaw. The brown she-cat shrieked as he pulled her into the river, laughing loudly.

"How dare you!" exclaimed Leopardpaw, batting at Bearpaw, who just laughed in response.

The apprentices pulled themselves out of the river, each sopping

wet and grinning madly.

"Alright," Darkpaw relented, eyes sparkling. "That was fun." Graypaw nodded, grinning.

"It sure was," she said softly, eyes glowing with an emotion that Darkpaw couldn't quite place. She stared back at Graypaw, still smiling. It was Leopardpaw who broke the silence.

"Alright, let's dry off. There's a great place for sunning ourselves near StormClan border." The others chorused their agreement before following Leopardpaw through the forest again, up to where the trees thinned into the sandy beach. A large pile of flat rocks lay right next to the water, and Leopardpaw hopped onto the highest stone.

"Dibs!" she called, lifting her tail. Bearpaw chose the rock nearest to the water, with Darkpaw and Graypaw sharing the ledge somewhere in between.

The sun was warm, and Darkpaw was exhausted. She and Graypaw basked in the warm midday sun, and Darkpaw savored the feeling of Graypaw's warmth pressing into her pelt. She closed her eyes, and rested her chin on her paws, letting the gentle lap of the waves and rustling of the nearby trees lull her into a peaceful rest.

Darkpaw hadn't noticed she had fallen asleep until she was being prodded in the side by Graypaw.

"Darkpaw!" exclaimed Graypaw, a note of laughter in her voice. "We all fell asleep!" Darkpaw shook her head wearily, blinking upwards.

"Oh stars," she said, peering at the darkening sky. She bounded up to where Leopardpaw was sitting. "It's beautiful."

A massive sunset was stretched over the dark waves that glittered in the dying sun. Shades of reds and oranges stained the sky, bathing the four apprentice's pelts in warm shades of gold. A moment later, they were joined by Graypaw and Bearpaw, and the four sat in silence, admiring the sunset. Graypaw pressed into Darkpaw's pelt, keeping her warm in the chill that came with the coming of night.

"We should get back to camp. They'll worry," murmured Graypaw softly. Darkpaw sighed.

"You're right," she mumbled, only rising once Graypaw did. "Let's go home."

The four apprentices padded back in comfortable silence, the faint rustle of trees and calling of birds being the only sounds in the chilly air. Graypaw and Darkpaw padded side by side, their pelts brushing comfortably together.

At that moment, Darkpaw wanted nothing in the world more than to make that moment last forever.

It was perfect.

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4

"Darkpaw!" Darkpaw turned, glancing up at her mentor. "Are you ready for training?" Darkpaw hesitated before nodding.

"Fine," she sighed. She stood up, mewing a quick goodbye to Graypaw, Bearpaw, and Leopardpaw before following Spottedfire out of camp.

It had been a little over a moon since Darkpaw had gotten suspended from patrols, and she was finally allowed to resume her training.

Spottedfire led Darkpaw back down to the beach, which provided a better area for sparring as opposed to the crowded and uncomfortable woods.

"Today, we're going to practice anticipation," meowed Spottedfire when they got there. "Essentially, you're going to try to predict my next move before I make it."

"How? Isn't that impossible?" blurted Darkpaw. Spottedfire gave a small smile.

"Not necessarily, but it is tough. Here, let me show you."

The ginger she-cat stood up, and Darkpaw mirrored her. Without warning, Spottedfire's paw shot forward, and Darkpaw ducked her head quickly. "See that?" said Spottedfire, but Darkpaw was still confused.

"But I didn't *anticipate* that, I just dodged."

"Right," said Spottedfire. "You reacted and used your reflexes. Now, if you are able to train your reflexes right, you will notice the signs of an opponent about to be able to attack, and you won't have to

rely on your reflexes. When you dodged my paw just now, it was a bit clumsy, and I could have used your surprise against you." Darkpaw remembered how much easier it had been to attack Brightpaw when she didn't see it coming, and how stunned the apprentice had been. She nodded hesitantly.

"Yeah, I think I get it. So what are the signs?" Spottedfire stood, and smiled approvingly.

"Well, if you're paying attention, one sign is if your opponent focuses specifically on one spot. For example, if they look really fiercely at your face, that might be a warning sign that they're about to attack you. Anticipate the attack, and you'll be able to reflect smoothly and counter-attack. Let's try it."

The two cats circled one another, and Darkpaw focused on her mentor's face as fiercely as she could. Suddenly, her mentor's eyes glanced down, and Darkpaw stumbled into the sand as her mentor swiftly knocked her legs out from under her.

"Hey!" complained Darkpaw, spitting out wet sand. "That's not fair! You didn't tell me you were going to sweep my legs!"

"That's the point," said Spottedfire calmly. "Your opponent won't tell you. But I did see you stiffen when you noticed my eyes go downwards. You were too late, but you're getting it."

"I bet Brightpaw's already a master at 'anticipation'," Darkpaw muttered sourly, turning her head to glare at the ocean. Spottedfire sat next to her, pressing one of her paws onto Darkpaw's.

"I don't understand why you hate Brightpaw so much," she murmured. Darkpaw kept her gaze on the waves.

"It's because everyone treats her super special, and everyone seems to think that she's our lord and savior," Darkpaw muttered so quietly that it was almost drowned out by the persistent wind. "And- and because she's good at everything.." Darkpaw stood up, her voice rising with suppressed rage. "And she wins every competition, and she wins every battle, and everybody loves her and compliments her..."

Darkpaw was shouting now, her voice ringing out across the waves. "And she can get away with everything she wants because she's the precious savior of all the Clans! But no one cares about Darkpaw, her stupid failure of a sister! Because I can't do anything right, and everyone thinks she's better than me! I just know it!"

Tears started rolling down Darkpaw's cheeks. "It's not fair!" She looked away from Spottedfire. She didn't want to see her mentor's reaction. There was a moment of silence, then Spottedfire laid her tail across Darkpaw's shoulders, resting her chin on the top of her apprentice's head.

"It's okay," she said in a low voice. "I understand."

"No you don't," muttered Darkpaw bitterly.

"Yes, I do," said Spottedfire firmly. "My brother is Flamesoot."

"My Dad?" asked Darkpaw, finally meeting Spottedfire's eyes.

"Mhm," she said. "I'm your aunt. I'm sure he's told you before, but you probably forgot." Darkpaw became silent as Spottedfire's eyes unfocused. "Flamesoot, your father, is one of the best hunters in the Clan. And my other brother, Batmask? Nearly twice as good. They were both always so successful. They always brought in the most prey. They both got themselves mates. And they both had kits, or are going to have kits. They are what we call a success in life." Spottedfire hesitated, gazing into her apprentice's eyes. "And I never was. I always messed up hunting. In fact, I didn't catch my first piece of prey until I was nearly nine moons old. Three whole moons after my ceremony. So yes, Darkpaw, I understand. All you had to do was talk to me. I'll always be here for you."

Darkpaw sniffled, eyes still wet. "Really?"

"Of course. You're my niece, and you're my apprentice." Spottedfire rose to her feet. "Come on, let's do some hunting to finish the day off, then we can head back home and get you a good night's rest. What do you think?" Darkpaw nodded gratefully, leaning against her mentor's side for a brief moment.

"Whatever you do," whispered Spottedfire. "I'll be with you."

"That's not quite the right pose," Spottedfire remarked, padding around Darkpaw and examining her. "Your tail is sticking straight out. Hasn't that ever lost you prey?" Darkpaw glanced back at her twitching tail-tip.

"I always thought of it as bad luck," she mumbled, embarrassed.

"What you want to do," continued Spottedfire. "is curl your tail over your back. It won't get in your way then. And when you leap, you want it to go out straight behind you to help you keep your balance."

"What about when I hunt in the trees?" asked Darkpaw curiously.

"What do you think?" Darkpaw hesitated for a moment.

"You hold it just above the branch?" she guessed, and Spottedfire nodded with approval.

"Good thinking. Why don't you try that now?" Darkpaw frowned, a little nervous.

"Are you sure?"

Spottedfire nodded. "There's a sparrow a few trees ahead. I can hear it. Go try to get it." She watched as Darkpaw moved forward nervously. *I'm not a StormClan cat!* she thought sullenly. She hooked her claws reluctantly into the trunk, pausing for a moment. After a brief hesitation, she pulled herself up to the first branch, balancing precariously on the dark wood.

She leaped to the next branch, tensing as it shuddered under her weight. One more leap and she'd reach the sparrow.

She lowered herself until her belly was just barely touching the wood underneath her, stretching out her tail carefully. The tip gave a nervous twitch, and it sent a few leaves spiraling into the sky. The sparrow froze, turning its head slowly to gaze at her with its small, dark eyes. Darkpaw moved as fast as she could, leaping into the air powerfully. It flapped its wings rapidly, messily alighting off the

branch.

"No!" yelped Darkpaw, and without thinking, she lunged after it.

There was a moment of triumph as the small bird's feathers became caught in her hooked claws. Then her stomach dropped as she plummeted like a stone. She smacked into several branches on her way down, and finally thudded to the bottom, dazed and bruised.

"Darkpaw! Stars, are you okay?" said Spottedfire, alarmed, rushing over. Darkpaw lifted her head, blinking to clear the stars that danced before her eyes.

"I'm fine... I think," she mumbled, wincing as she climbed to her paws.

"That's enough for today," sighed Spottedfire, wrapping her tail around Darkpaw's flank. "To the medicine den, with you."

"Can you grab my starling?" mumbled Darkpaw.

"Your starl- Oh my stars-" Spottedfire let out an incredulous laugh. "You caught it? That was extremely stupid of you, but still-" Spottedfire shook her head, but there was a small smile on her face. "I can't say I'm not impressed. Yes, Darkpaw, I'll grab your starling."

Despite the bruises that littered her pelt, Darkpaw glowed with pride as she limped into camp carrying a battered starling, Spottedfire close at her side.

Luckily, Darkpaw didn't need to climb to get into the medicine den. With a little help from Spottedfire, she was boosted up to the low ledge.

"Darkpaw!" exclaimed Pinesmolder, rushing over. "What happened?"

"I feel out of a tree," said Darkpaw, head spinning suddenly. Pinesmolder pushed her into a soft nest. "Stay there," he said, moving over to the other side of the den where a few herbs were assorted in neat piles. Darkpaw felt her eyes begin to droop shut, and her head dropped onto her paws. Her eyes closed, and she was asleep.

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5

"Darkpaw! *Darkpaw!*" Darkpaw shook her head tiredly, looking up.

"Graypaw- what?" Graypaw's eyes gleamed in the early sunlight, outlined against the dark gray sky.

"Brightpaw wants to see you," she mewed hesitantly, and Darkpaw rolled her eyes, turning over.

"Tell her I said no," she mumbled, burying her muzzle in her paws. She heard the shuffle of Graypaw's paws as she padded into the den.

"Please? It's not just you, if it helps. She had Leopardpaw and Bearpaw meet her too." Darkpaw hesitated, half-opening one eye to peer warily at Graypaw.

"Fine," she said at last. She rose to her paws, yawning. "But this better be good."

She followed Graypaw somewhat grumpily out of the den, blinking in the cold light of dawn. Almost no one else was up. Graypaw led them to the cluster of apprentices near the entrance that was Brightpaw, Leopardpaw, and Bearpaw. Darkpaw sat down next to Graypaw, glaring at Brightpaw.

"What is this about?" she demanded, curling her tail around her paws. Brightpaw snorted.

"No need to get huffy," she hummed. "But I had an idea for today."

"An idea?" hissed Darkpaw, flexing her claws. "Since when have your ideas involved me?" Brightpaw shot her a glare.

"And my idea," she continued, completely ignoring Darkpaw. "is to hold a race up the side of the volcano. None of us have done it yet,

and it's like, an age-old tradition."

"Wait," Leopardpaw cut in, narrowing her eyes. "Isn't that like supposedly, I don't know, *super* dangerous?"

"It can be," admitted Brightpaw, but her eyes shone in a way that made Darkpaw think that might not be one of her sister's biggest concerns. "Look, I'll tell you what. Whoever wins gets to be the 'leader' for an entire day. They can tell any of us what to do, and they'll have to do it." Darkpaw suddenly had leaped to her paws.

"No!" she snarled. "That's a terrible idea!"

"What?" purred Brightpaw, eyes flickering coldly. "Worried I might win?" Darkpaw hesitated, mouth half-open.

"N-"

"Then I don't see a problem."

"I'll play!" relented Leopardpaw, with a small smile. "It sounds fun, and as long as we're careful, it should be fine."

"I guess I will too," murmured Graypaw, and Bearpaw nodded amiably. Darkpaw froze, eyes darting from Leopardpaw, to Graypaw, to Brightpaw.

"I-" Brightpaw met Darkpaw's eyes, and Darkpaw sighed. "I'll play too," she hissed, tail-tip lashing. "But only so you won't win." Brightpaw grinned, seemingly satisfied.

"Sunhigh," she said simply, before turning tail and trotting back into camp.

The others followed her with varying levels of enthusiasm. Darkpaw watched them go with narrowed eyes before standing. But as she made her way back through the empty camp, she couldn't suppress the shivers that wouldn't stop running through her pelt.

Sunhigh it was.

"Are you ready?" Brightpaw turned to grin at the rest of them.

Darkpaw stepped forward, bristling slightly.

"Are you?" she shot back, and Brightpaw grinned even wider.

"We start on the count of three!" she announced. The apprentices fell into line, bunching their muscles. "Three!" Darkpaw's heart pounded. It wasn't a big deal, was it? "Two!" It was just a friendly race. But... "One...!" Darkpaw took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Go!" Brightpaw's voice rang out through the clearing, and the five apprentices shot forward.

Darkpaw leaped with all her might, catching hold on a decently high ledge. Cats were gathering below her. Darkpaw caught snatches of their conversation.

"*A volcano race? Haven't had one of those in a while*."

"I wonder who'll win?"

"Bet it'll be that Brightpaw!"

Darkpaw gritted her teeth. She'd show them. She hooked her claws on the next ledge. None of the dens were this high. She felt the wind rushing through her ears as she grabbed foothold after foothold.

She dared a look back, and her face lit up. She was in the lead!

She turned back to the volcano. *I can do this!* Her heart pounded in her ears as she climbed ledge after ledge. The ground was so far below her...

Suddenly, two shapes shot past her. She stumbled back in surprise, her hind paws slipping off the ledge. She let out a shriek of terror, ripping at the stone with her forepaws as her hind paws dangled in midair.

"Help!" she yowled as she slid backward. She kicked at the air hopelessly and scratched at the smooth stone, but there was nothing to go. "HELP!" she screeched again, trying to boost herself forward. The act caused her to lose balance, and another forepaw slipped.

Suddenly, sharp teeth fastened on one of her forepaws, and she felt herself being hauled back onto the ledge.

"Graypaw!" she said instinctively, dizzy with relief. "Thank..." But it wasn't Graypaw. Leopardpaw panted, greenish-gold eyes shining with fear. "Leopardpaw?" Leopardpaw nodded breathlessly. "You-You saved me!"

"Yeah, I lost the race to do it. Look, up there! Graypaw and Brightpaw are nearly side by side!" Darkpaw followed the she-cat's gaze to watch the two shapes that hurtled forward, neck in neck. Bearpaw trailed behind, but he slowed down as he realized how close the other two were to the top.

"Graypaw's pulling ahead!" exclaimed Darkpaw suddenly, leaning forward. "Go, Graypaw!" The dusty gray she-cat had bounded forward suddenly, moving past Brightpaw. Darkpaw watched, beaming as Graypaw pulled herself rapidly onto the cusp of the volcano.

Time slowed down. Darkpaw's eyes widened. Graypaw had won-but why wasn't Brightpaw stopping? The ginger she-cat hurtled forward, paws outstretched. They were going to collide.

Darkpaw's warning call died on her lips as Brightpaw slammed into Graypaw and the she-cat tipped backward.

One second she was there, eyes wide with horror, balancing on one paw. The next, she was gone, her scream trailing after her through the long, horrible silence that followed. Darkpaw felt a dark, cold numbness creeping over her. Her paws felt rooted to the ground.

A terrible silence had shadowed the entire Clan. The racers and spectators alike were speechless. It was Leopardpaw who broke the silence.

"Graypaw!" she screamed, and Darkpaw almost recoiled. The terror and the heartbreak in Leopardpaw's voice was raw and horrible. "Graypaw!" she repeated, her voice cracking. Darkpaw staggered on her paws, shaking her head numbly. No! No... Tears stabbed at the edges of her eyelids before pouring over. She let out a loose sob,

stumbling backward and nearly slipping off the edge again. Her head spun. This wasn't possible. This couldn't have happened.

Brightpaw killed her. *My sister killed Graypaw*. It was the only thought she could hold onto as her vision dipped and blurred, and she collapsed to the ground as her mind faded into a cold, numb blackness.

Darkpaw sat in silence, tears still rolling down her face as the Clan gathered around the volcano.

"We are gathered here today to mourn the loss of one of our most promising apprentices, Graypaw." Echostar rose her head, her dark gray fur rippling in the wind. The sky was painted over with golds and ambers. Darkpaw felt something inside her breaking. *Graypaw loved the sunsets.* "Graypaw was the daughter of two of our finest warriors, Quailstep and Duskglow."

A cat erupted into sobs from the surrounded crowd, and Darkpaw turned dully to see as Quailstep burst into tears, pressing her face into her mate's shoulder. Her light brown spotted pelt was wet from her sobbing, and Duskglow rested his head gently on Quailstep's head, his own eyes still wet. Leopardpaw and Bearpaw sat next to them. Leopardpaw was staring at her own paws, tears spattering onto the dry ground. Bearpaw was silent with grief that couldn't be spoken aloud.

"Her death was a tragic one," continued Echostar in a strong but heavy voice. "But we must all be reminded in times like this of the importance of valuing our Clan members. Graypaw was loved by everyone around he-"

She was interrupted by a grief-filled screech from Leopardpaw. The brown she-cat had pinned Brightpaw to the ground, claws unsheathed.

"You killed her!" she screamed, tears still dripping from her face. She lashed another claw across the ginger she-cat's face, and Brightpaw yelped with pain.

A couple of warriors rushed over to drag Leopardpaw off, and the

young she-cat relented, collapsing into more sobs. Echostar sighed and nodded to Starlingcall and Whisperfoot. The two elders moved forward, Whisperfoot carrying a speckled gray pebble in her jaws.

"Because there is no body to burn," said Starlingcall in a hollow voice. "This pebble will represent Graypaw." Whisperfoot set it down, and both cats pushed their noses to it. "Those who knew her well may offer their wishes to her spirit." Quailstep and Duskglow stepped forward.

"She was a wonderful daughter," Quailstep whispered, touching her nose to the pebble. Duskstep followed suit.

"I am still so proud of her," he murmured. Bearpaw and Leopardpaw moved up next.

"She was always such a good sister," choked Leopardpaw. "And she-" She shook her head hopelessly, pushing her nose into the pebble.

"Words couldn't express how much I loved her," sighed Bearpaw in a sad voice, and he too touched the pebble. Darkpaw stepped forward, head lowered.

"She was the best friend I ever had," she whispered, trying as hard as she could to keep the tremble out of her voice. The pebble was cold to the touch, but part of her felt like she could feel a part of Graypaw in it.

One by one, cats moved forward. Graypaw's mentor, Scarletblaze, talked about how much she had valued Graypaw's willingness to learn. Pinesmolder talked about how she had always been so helpful. The words just flowed past Darkpaw's head, buzzing into a quiet white noise.

Finally, Echostar moved forward, picking the pebble up in her jaws. She bounded up the volcano as the Clan watched. When she reached the top, she dropped the pebble into the lava. Darkpaw saw her lips move but had no idea what the she-cat was saying. Echostar bounded back down and dipped her head to her Clan.

"Dismissed," she murmured.

By now, the sky was dark, the sunset had long since faded into dark scarlets and blacks. Darkpaw stumbled back to the apprentice's den.

Leopardpaw sat alone in the corner, her head pushed into the stone wall. Darkpaw hesitated before silently moving forward to press against her pelt. Leopardpaw leaned into Darkpaw wordlessly, pressing her muzzle into Darkpaw's pelt. She leaned back into Leopardpaw.

Darkpaw would never know how long they sat like that, but it didn't matter. Graypaw was gone, but the world would always go on.

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6

Darkpaw opened her dark amber eyes to a beam of sun that stretched through the thin opening at the front of her den, pooling golden light around her nest. She yawned, blinking and stretching her forepaws out in front of her. She glanced at the nests around her. Bearpaw was still asleep near the back, forepaws curled over his round muzzle, but the other nests were deserted. Darkpaw tilted her head to the side as she noticed that Graypaw's nest was neat, and orderly. It didn't look like the apprentice had slept there last night. Then the terrible memories resurfaced to plunge Darkpaw back into the cold, numbness that had gripped her the day before.

Darkpaw took a deep breath, twisting her gaze away from the empty nest. The warm sunlight seemed to thaw the coldness, just a touch. It still hurt her, but the weight seemed to lift a little bit. She reached out to grope for her thoughts of the previous day.

Graypaw is gone, but life must continue. Determinedly, she rose to her paws, taking another deep breath.

She stepped out of the den, squinting in the early sunlight. She skidded down the edge of the volcano until her paws rested on dry earth. She glanced around the camp, tail-tip twitching.

Pinesmoulder, the medicine cat, was sitting with his tail twined around his sister's, Quailstep's. Their other sister, Cloudsmoke, had her white and brown-patched pelt pressed against Quailstep's other side. Batmask, Ashrain, and Leaftrail were gathered near the front, taking their first steps out of camp.

Darkpaw's eyes traveled around camp until she spotted Leopardpaw. She looked to be talking to her mentor, Nightstalk, a lithe, short-furred black tom with warm golden eyes. He and Leopardpaw both glanced over, and he nodded to the she-cat. Leopardpaw stood up, padding over to Darkpaw. She was gazing off

to the side. Her head was hung low between her shoulders, and her tail dragged across the ground.

Darkpaw met her halfway, and pressed against her side comfortingly.

"Hi, Leopardpaw," she said hesitantly. Leopardpaw glanced up with her, green-gold eyes shining sadly.

"Hi..." she mumbled. Darkpaw rested her muzzle on the top of the she-cat's head.

"I know it seems impossible right now, but we can get through this," she whispered. A silence followed that made Darkpaw's fur prickle.

I said the wrong thing, didn't I? I bet I made everything worse! But a moment later, Leopardpaw nodded.

"...Yeah," she said. "You're right. Do... you want to talk about it?"

"Are you sure?" queried Darkpaw, faintly surprised. Leopardpaw nodded.

"It would feel better to get it off my chest." They were silent for a moment.

"Do you blame Brightpaw?" asked Darkpaw at last. Leopardpaw was silent.

"I..." She stared at her paws forlornly. "I don't know. It... it must have been an accident."

"But what if it wasn't?" Leopardpaw glanced up at Darkpaw.

"What do you mean?"

"What if-"

"Darkpaw!" The voice cut loudly through the clearing. Darkpaw glanced around as Spottedfire padded up, her tortoiseshell tail waving in the air. "Come on, time for training!" She wouldn't meet Darkpaw's gaze, and sounded uncharacteristically upbeat. Darkpaw

furrowed her brow.

"But-"

"No buts! Come on!" Spottedfire turned tail, and Darkpaw reluctantly followed her, mewing a quick goodbye to Leopardpaw.

"I'm sorry," sighed Spottedfire when they were out of camp. "I know I was being pushy. But.. I really need to be out, training. If you know what I mean. I can't stand to be in camp any longer." Darkpaw nodded slowly, glancing off in the distance.

"I guess it's fine," she mumbled.

"Why don't we do some light hunting today?" asked Spottedfire with a small sigh. Darkpaw nodded hesitantly.

"Okay."

"How about you go hunt alongside the Great River? I'll head over near the StormClan border. We can meet back at the Waterside when we're finished." Darkpaw nodded, and watched as Spottedfire disappeared into the forest, shadows hiding her from sight before her rustling pawsteps through the undergrowth became too faint to hear.

Darkpaw turned, heading up the pathway to where the Great River bordered the territories of RainClan and DawnClan. Further along, it would curve to encircle DawnClan territory, the center of their home.

As she padded through the forest, she felt like she could hear the happy shouts and laughter of Leopardpaw, Bearpaw, and herself from their previous adventures around the territory. *And Graypaw.* Graypaw was the loudest, in a way. She felt the grief pushing into her again. And this time, guilt. She had agreed to the Volcano race, had she not? She could have tried to convince everyone it was a bad idea. And what had she done? Let it all happen around her. Like a useless piece of stone, incapable of doing anything other than sitting and watching. She paused, staring at her reflection in the

river. Her golden eyes stared mournfully back at her. She suddenly lashed a paw into the river, ripping apart the peaceful tranquility with her claws. The reflection sprayed into a distorted ripple of colors. She turned her head away, tears stinging at the corners of her eyes.

Hunt, she told herself. *Just hunt, and everything will be fine*.

So she hunted.

She padded side by side with her mentor as the sky fell to dusk around them. This was their second trip back to camp, as they needed to take several detours to collect the prey they had buried in various parts of the territory. Two mice and a starling were awkwardly carried in Darkpaw's jaws, and Spottedfire carried a fat rabbit. Rabbits, on the island, were far and few between. The majority of them lived in DawnClan territory, which was why it was such a rarity to find them anywhere else. Spottedfire also carried a bedraggled-looking squirrel.

As they arrived into camp, they dropped their prey near the base of the volcano.

"Why don't you bring this rabbit to the elders?" Spottedfire asked Darkpaw, nodding towards one of the lower caves. Darkpaw sighed, eyeing the rabbit wistfully, but nodded. She picked it up, straining to hold herself from eating the thing herself. She slipped into the elder's den, where both Whisperfoot and Starlingcall seemed to be asleep. However, as Darkpaw padded in, Starlingcall lifted his head drowsily, his black pelt slightly ruffled.

"Oh, hello, Darkpaw," he yawned. "That for us?" Darkpaw nodded, dropping the rabbit respectfully. "Right then!" He gazed at the rabbit, gaze lit with delight. "A rabbit! Hey, Whisperfoot! Get up! Darkpaw brought us a rabbit!" Whisperfoot grumbled something as she lifted her head.

"Well I'll be!" she rasped upon seeing the rabbit. As Darkpaw padded away, she heard Whisperfoot say loudly, "Maybe that one's got a bit more to her than I gave her credit for, eh?"

Darkpaw bounded up the volcano into the apprentice's den. Bearpaw was idly fidgeting with a sprig of moss in the back, his gaze unusually empty. Brightpaw was asleep. Leopardpaw was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, Bearpaw? Have.. you seen Leopardpaw, by any chance?" asked Darkpaw, carefully picking her way around nests. Bearpaw shook his head.

"Not since this afternoon," he yawned. "Why?" Darkpaw frowned. Without giving a response, she turned and pushed her way back out of the den.

"Quailstep?" she asked, trotting up to the speckled light brown she-cat. "Have... uh... you seen Leopardpaw?" She shook her head, green eyes dull.

"No," she mumbled.

She turned, spotting Nightstalk with his mate, Pinesmolder.

"Sorry to interrupt," she started, but Nightstalk shook his head softly.

"No, No," the tom said cheerfully. "Quite alright." Pinesmolder licked his paw idly.

"Have you seen Leopardpaw by any chance?" she asked her friend's mentor hopefully. He shook his head.

"Nope. I let her off training for today, so I wouldn't have a clue where she got off to." Darkpaw took a deep breath. *Where was Leopardpaw?* A dark feeling settled at the pit of her stomach. Something couldn't happened to her... right?

She suddenly rushed out of the entrance of camp, heart pounding in her throat.

She raced through the undergrowth, brambles tugging at her fur. Suddenly, she spotted a spotted brown pelt.

"Leopardpaw!" she exclaimed, voice taut with relief. Leopardpaw

turned around, green-gold eyes shining with tears. "I was so worried about you," murmured Darkpaw.

"You... were?" Leopardpaw gazed at her. "I thought... Well..." Darkpaw pressed against her comfortingly, and she took a shaky sigh. "It feels like now that Graypaw's gone, there's nobody to care about me."

"What about Bearpaw?" murmured Darkpaw.

"He has his own demons to deal with," Leopardpaw whispered, resting her chin on Darkpaw's shoulder. They were silent for a moment, the soft gurgling of the Great River echoing against the faint rustling of the leaves of the trees above them. Far away, the distant crash of waves sounded against the beach, rhythmic and soothing.

"I'll always be there for you," promised Darkpaw after the pause.

There was silence once more. The she-cats sat side by side, their tears dampening the dry earth beneath their feet. But they both felt safe. They had each other. They were together.

And a subconscious part of each made them believe that nothing would ever take them apart.

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7

"Darkpaw!" Darkpaw glanced up suddenly at the call behind her. "Wh-"

"You're going on patrol! Did you not here?" Darkpaw blinked her golden eyes, tilting her ears back.

"Of course I heard," she huffed, turning to glare at Leopardpaw, who smirked. "Who's coming?"

"I thought you heard," teased Leopardpaw, starting to pad away, light brown spotted tail cutting through the air.

"I did!" exclaimed Darkpaw, scampering to keep up. "Just... testing you." She puffed. "Why are your legs so long?"

"At least I'm not short," Leopardpaw snorted, rolling her eyes.

They padded to the entrance of camp where Nightstalk, Spottedfire, Sootysnow and Cloudstalk sat, waiting.

"Are we ready to go yet?" growled Sootysnow ill-temperedly. "I feel like we've been waiting here forever. And frankly, I'm bored." Cloudsmoke rolled her eyes.

"We've been waiting for ten seconds," sighed Spottedfire. "Come on, you two," she said, turning to Leopardpaw and Darkpaw. The patrol left camp. Above the canopy, the sky was bright where the sun cut through the leaves, dappling the forest floor with golden light.

"I suggest we split up," said Nightstalk after a few moments.

"That's a dumb idea," muttered Sootysnow.

"Oh is it now?" said Spottedfire softly, but her voice carried an icy

undertone. "And why would that possibly be?" Sootysnow hesitated, at a loss for words. The tom's white fur puffed up.

"I-"

"Since when did you become so argumentative?" snorted Cloudsmoke.

"Oh, trust me, he was always like this," grinned Nightstalk. "As his Dad, I've had to deal with a lot of arrogance from this one." Sootysnow scowled.

"At least I can hunt right," he muttered under his breath, but Nightstalk's voice rose over his.

"How about Cloudsmoke and Sootysnow head over to the RainClan border? There's a lot of good prey there in this season. Me, Spottedfire, Leopardpaw and Darkpaw can circle over by the cliffsides. We can meet back here." Sootysnow opened his mouth like he was about to argue, but Cloudsmoke started to pad away, and he snapped it shut, glared at his father, and rushed after her.

As the remaining members of the patrol turned their course, Darkpaw fell in line behind Leopardpaw as they padded over the dry ground. There were already hints of the Autumn months coming, and Darkpaw flicked her tail with a hint of worry. Suddenly, she heard rustling from behind them. Darkpaw hesitated. She turned, dropping back from the patrol. No one seemed to notice.

I bet it's a rabbit! She thought to herself, excitement pulsing through her. She glanced back towards the patrol, who were drawing away. She would catch whatever it was, then catch up with them. They would all be so impressed. Brightpaw had never caught a rabbit before, hadn't she?

Without hesitation, she lowered herself to the ground, creeping forward. She pushed her way through the leaves, but was met with not the sight of a rabbit, but of a dark ginger tabby pelt.

"Brightpaw?" hissed Darkpaw, rising to her feet. "What are you

doing here?" Brightpaw wasn't wearing her usual smirk or cocky grin. Instead, her eyes were cold and dark. Darkpaw felt herself shiver, fur standing on end.

"I heard you talking with Leopardpaw yesterday," she said simply, but something about her tone of voice made Darkpaw uneasy.

"So?" she growled. "I can have friends." She fixed Brightpaw with a hard glare, unsheathing her claws. "Even if you try to kill them!"

"Graypaw's death was an accident."

"Oh, I bet it was!" snarled Darkpaw sarcastically, fury rising inside her. "You're a fox-hearted traitor! You meant to kil-"

"It was an accident," insisted Brightpaw, but her voice carried no tone of apology. It was simply cold and empty. Almost hollow. Her eyes were strange too. No light seemed to reflect off of them. Her green-blue eyes were dark and shadowy. Empty. "But," the she-cat continued. "If you keep trying to spread rumors like that, I'll be forced to take drastic measures."

Darkpaw felt her blood run cold. She was frozen in place. "Like... what?" she managed to spit out.

"I see you've found a friend in Leopardpaw." Brightpaw examined her claws, the sun glinting off them. "It reminds me of how you were with Graypaw. Happy." She leaned in so close, Darkpaw could feel Brightpaw's whiskers brushing against her cheeks.

"What-"

"You wouldn't want me to take that happiness away, would you?" Darkpaw sprang back, fur bristing. Her eyes were slit with fury.

"You stay away from her!" she screeched, lunging at Brightpaw. But her claws fell upon nothing. She whirled around, but Brightpaw was somehow already behind her. She lashed out with a claw, catching Darkpaw under the chin. The tortoiseshell she-cat was flipped over. She slammed into a tree, where she slid down, muscles screaming with pain. *How is she so fast? She shouldn't be this strong! This is impossible!* Brightpaw padded steadily over as Darkpaw staggered to

her paws.

"Trust me, sister, you do not want to start a fight with me," murmured Brightpaw, eyes glowing with something colder than Darkpaw could have ever imagined. "But rest assured, if you keep your muzzle shut, your life will continue as normal. I give my word."

"And what does your word mean?" snapped Darkpaw, glaring at Brightpaw with pure hatred in her stare. Brightpaw paused before she answered.

"Nothing, to you. But everything to me."

The next morning, Darkpaw was awoken by an insistent prodding in her side. She blinked open her eyes sleepily to see Bearpaw, bending down to stare at her. The dark brown tom blinked, forest green eyes reflecting the morning sunlight.

"Spottedfire wants you for training," he said simply, before standing back, giving Darkpaw room to stretch. She shook dust and grit out of her fur before giving her pelt a quick groom. Bearpaw stepped out of the den as Darkpaw rose to her paws with a massive yawn. She followed Bearpaw out of the den, dragging her paws and muttering something about sleep.

She stepped onto the ledge that was just outside the apprentice's den, peering down. Sure enough, Spottedfire was waiting for her, tail-tip twitching impatiently.

She glanced up at Darkpaw, the dark-spotted ginger she-cat's pelt cast in shadows. The sky was gray and dark outside- the sun hadn't even yet risen.

"Well, come on, then," called Spottedfire. Her dull blue eyes gleamed cheerfully. "We haven't got all day, have we?" Darkpaw snorted before hopping down the edge of the volcano.

She landed just in front of Spottedfire, who turned and briskly began to trot out of camp. Darkpaw followed, albeit dragging her paws reluctantly as she went.

"It's so early," Darkpaw muttered ill-temperedly, aiming a kick at a rock. She missed. She bared her teeth at the rock, pausing. She swiped it as hard as she could to the side and watched it fly into the bushes with a satisfying crunch as it parted the leaves around it. Spottedfire snorted.

"What did the rock ever do to you, hm?" Darkpaw muttered something about the stupidity of rocks. "In any case, we're up this early because I wanted to squeeze some training in before the dawn patrol. I don't know what Echostar was thinking, but apparently she decided to put me on all the patrols with my brothers." She scowled.

"Why is that so terrible? Are you fighting?" Spottedfire sighed.

"It's really none of your concern."

"But wha-"

"Oh, look at that! We're already here!" They stopped where the beach began to grow rocky and the trees parted. A little ways away, the stone rose into a tall cliffside.

"Why are we training here?" asked Darkpaw, blinking at the cliffs. "Don't we usually train at the sandy part of the beach?" She gestured to the wide, flat expanse of sand further along the coastline.

"Yes, but you'll need to learn how to traverse all territory. Beach, forest, marshland, cliffsides... That's part of what makes us so unique, you know. We alone among the Clans have all types of terrains in our territory. From the thickest of vegetation to the sparsest of trees, to huge cliffsides, wide beaches, and open moor, we've got it all."

"Does that mean we're the best Clan?" asked Darkpaw, half-jokingly. As they talked, the pair had begun to make their way up the cliffside, which turned out to be a lot harder to traverse than the volcano. The ocean had smoothed and polished the stone so that there were few solid footholds.

"Of course not!" grinned Spottedfire, sitting down at the top as she waited for Darkpaw to join her. "That'll always be DawnClan." Darkpaw clawed her way over the last ledge, sitting next to Spottedfire. She stared out at the painted sunset. The ocean waves flowed rhythmically onto the shore, but Darkpaw scowled.

"Why's *DawnClan* the best Clan?" she asked, slightly annoyed. Spottedfire looked vaguely surprised.

"Well, surely you'd know! They keep the peace between us, right?" Darkpaw's scowl deepened.

"They didn't help much when Brightpaw shoved Graypaw into the Volcano," she muttered in a shaky voice. Her throat clenched tightly.

"Oh, Darkpaw..." murmured Spottedfire, curling her tail around Darkpaw, but the tortoiseshell turned her head away as tears began to slip down her cheeks. "It was an accident..."

"It was not an accident!" Darkpaw yowled suddenly, causing her mentor's eyes to widen in shock. "I know that it wasn't!" Tears rolled thickly down her cheeks. "Brightpaw killed my best friend!" Her chest heaved with sobs, and she glared at Spottedfire, gaze blurred by tears. Her mentor's blue eyes softened.

"Darkpaw..." she murmured, but Darkpaw turned away, bounding and skidding down the edge of the cliff. "Darkpaw!" called Spottedfire.

"I'm done training!" screeched Darkpaw, not looking back as she stormed into the forest, creating a flurry of leaves fly into the air in her wake.

She collapsed in the shade of a large oak tree, burying her muzzle in her paws. Suddenly, she heard a cold, whispered voice.

"I warned you." Her head shot up, just in time to see the tip of a dark ginger tail disappear between bushes. She stayed frozen for a moment as time seemed to slow.

No. No no no no no! Darkpaw suddenly shot to her feet as she

launched after what must have been Brightpaw. She raced in a random direction, heart pounding. Eventually, she accidentally stumbled into camp. She whirled around frantically, fur fluffed up and eyes wide. A few cats glanced towards her, gazes a range of confused, annoyed, and concerned.

"Darkpaw?" mewed Charredlog from the nursery, but Darkpaw ignored them all. She spotted Bearpaw near the edge of camp, and she raced over to him, breaking up his conversation with his mentor, Scarletblaze.

"What do you think you're-" the red-furred warrior began to snarl, but Darkpaw interrupted her.

"Bearpaw! Where is Leopardpaw?" Darkpaw demanded, fear making her heart pound.

"I think she went on a patrol with Brightpaw, Leaftrail and Coldflurry a little while ago," he said, looking stunned. Darkpaw's heart pounded even harder. A cold sense of dread settled over her. Without another word, she raced out of camp, breaths coming shallow and quick. She refused to lose another friend.

But she might not have a choice in the matter.

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 8

Darkpaw's paws pounded the earth as she ran. *Where are they?* she thought frantically, looking from side to side, her ears pressed to her head.

She heard the sound of voices suddenly in front of her. She bunched her muscles, propelling herself through the undergrowth. She barreled into the midst of the patrol, who moved back, startled. Brightpaw and Leopardpaw were standing together near the corner, seeming to move away from the rest of the patrol. Brightpaw narrowed her eyes at Darkpaw's arrival.

"Leopardpaw!" Darkpaw exclaimed breathlessly, rushing over to the spotted she-cat. "Thank StarClan you're alright!" Leopardpaw blinked, tilting her head.

"Of course I'm alright," she said, tipping her head to the side. "What's going on?" Darkpaw glanced up at Brightpaw, whose pupils became slits. The slightest shake of her head was warning enough for Darkpaw. The tortoiseshell she-cat glared hard at Brightpaw.

"Er... no reason. I just scented... a... fox. Yes, a fox in the territory."

"A fox?" mused Coldflurry, moving forward. She blinked, sunlight dappling her gray spotted pelt. Her green eyes narrowed, shining the sun. "Where?" Darkpaw bit her lip nervously. Brightpaw sat down, dark ginger tail-tip twitching.

"Near... near the RainClan border," stammered Darkpaw. Leaftrail scowled, her red-brown fur starting to spike up.

"I bet it got in from the mainland," she growled. "RainClan always slacks off on these kind of things."

"Thank you for letting us know," said Coldflurry. "I'm shocked Brightpaw didn't scent it.

"Oh, I did," said Brightpaw, aiming a hard glare at Darkpaw. "I was waiting for the right moment to tell you." She turned her gaze back on her mentor, green-blue eyes gleaming and bright. "I just didn't want to interrupt your conversation with Leaftrail!"

"Of course you did!" Coldflurry purred, pride in her voice. "Why wouldn't you!" Darkpaw growled softly to herself. Leopardpaw caught her eye, questions in her narrow gaze. Darkpaw glanced back in the direction of camp, as if to say '*Later*'. Leopardpaw gave the tiniest of nods before giving Darkpaw a quick nuzzle.

"Thanks for being so worried about me," she said with a slight smile, looking embarrassed. Darkpaw smiled softly back.

"Of course," she murmured. She raised her voice to address the rest of the patrol. "I guess... I'll be going now."

"Take care," Coldflurry called after her. Darkpaw waved her tail in response.

When Darkpaw pushed her way back into camp, she was immediately stopped by Spottedfire.

"What was that all about?" she said in a low voice, narrowing her eyes. Darkpaw scowled.

"Nothing," she muttered unconvincingly.

"Darkpaw, you can tell me, I promise." Darkpaw growled something under her breath. "What was that?" Spottedfire asked, ears pricked.

"I said you wouldn't believe me if I did!" snapped Darkpaw. Spottedfire narrowed her eyes, looking unconvinced.

"Mhm..." she said faintly. "Well, I'll be expecting you for training tomorrow. And don't run off on me again, you hear?"

"I didn't run off," grumbled Darkpaw. Spottedfire apparently didn't hear, and if she did, she took no notice.

"Go on, then," she sighed to the apprentice. "I have... family matters to deal with." She turned her gaze onto Batmask, who sat in the corner of camp, his ginger pelt bathed in shadows. He turned his gaze onto Spottedfire, and beckoned with his tail. Darkpaw's mentor sighed, sounding exasperated. "Go get some rest," she mumbled, padding over to Batmask. Darkpaw, not wanting to intrude on her mentor's personal life, turned away.

Her stomach growled; she hadn't eaten all day. She made her way slowly to the fresh kill pile, dragging her paws.

She selected a mouse, and carried it over to the apprentice's den. She wanted some privacy while she ate.

When she pushed her head through, she saw that Bearpaw was already there.

"Do you ever leave?" Darkpaw said ill-temperedly, tail-tip flicking with annoyance. Bearpaw wouldn't meet her gaze, instead resigning to stare at the mouse that dangled from her jaws.

"Is that for me?" he asked faintly, a twinge of hope in his voice.

"Nope," growled Darkpaw, stalking over to the other corner of the den. "Mine. Go get your own." Bearpaw sighed, poking his head out of the entrance. Darkpaw watched him as he lingered for a moment, ears pricking forward. But the brown tom sighed and brought his head back in quickly. "What was all that about?" demanded Darkpaw suspiciously. "Who are you hiding from?"

"I could ask the same to you," replied Bearpaw defensively, fur beginning to fluff up. "Why in the Stars did you need to know where Leopardpaw was so bad?"

"None of your business!" snapped Darkpaw before returning to her mouse. There was an uncomfortable silence between the two cats. Finally, Bearpaw sighed as he relented.

"If you must know," he mumbled. "I'm hiding from Scarletblaze."

"Isn't she your mentor?" asked Darkpaw, mouse forgotten. Bearpaw nodded miserably.

"I don't know what Echostar was thinking. She's terrible. She yells at me for every mistake! And I just don't know what to do about it." Bearpaw rested his chin on his paws forlornly. "So I'm hiding." Darkpaw frowned sympathetically, coming over to rest her tailtip over his shoulders. "So?" he said, after a brief pause.

"So what?"

"I told you what's up with me- now you can tell me what's up with you." Darkpaw shook her head adamantly, frowning.

"Nope. Not happening." Bearpaw sat up.

"You can trust me," he said softly. "I trust you. I haven't told anyone else about Scarletblaze."

"Not even Leopardpaw?"

"Not even her."

Darkpaw hesitated. She debated briefly whether she trusted Bearpaw. *Oh well*, she thought. *Might as well tell someone. Besides, it's not like I can ruin a friendship if I don't really have one to begin with*.

"Fine," relented Darkpaw. "It's about Brightpaw."

"Really?" sighed Bearpaw. "Darkpaw, I know you hate her, but-"

"No, listen!" snapped Darkpaw, and Bearpaw shut his muzzle. "Alright, I think she pushed Graypaw in on purpose. And before you say anything," she said, noticing Bearpaw take a breath in, "just hear me out.

"She overheard me talking to Leopardpaw about it. I suggested that maybe the death was intentional. Later on, she intercepted me and pulled me to the side. She told me that if I kept spreading 'Rumors' she would kill Leopardpaw. But that's not the end of it.

"Later on, I had an argument with Spottedfire. The topic came up again. I don't know how she heard me, but after I had run into the forest, she said 'I warned you' and disappeared.

"I ran to catch up with their patrol, and it looked like Brightpaw was taking Leopardpaw somewhere. Somewhere to kill her."

When Darkpaw had finished, she let herself exhale as Bearpaw nodded thoughtfully.

"It sounds farfetched..." he began to murmur. Darkpaw narrowed her eyes, about to argue. "But!" Bearpaw said quickly. "I do believe you, Darkpaw." Darkpaw froze with disbelief.

"You do?" Bearpaw nodded solemnly. "I agree she's been acting strange. We'll figure out what to do about her later, okay? But for now, we need to get some rest. I heard we're both wanted for the Dusk patrol. Darkpaw paused before sighing.

"Okay. Fine. But please stay safe." Darkpaw stared seriously at Bearpaw, her dark amber eyes shimmering. "She scares me, Bearpaw. She's so fast and strong. She's better at fighting than any cat ever has been- than any cat ever should be." Bearpaw nodded, meeting her gaze.

"I understand," he said.

Later that evening, Darkpaw woke up as the sun had begun to fall. Warm shadows were cast across the den, amber light streaming in, contrasting with the darkness that encircled Darkpaw. Bearpaw was nowhere to be seen. Darkpaw stood up, stretching. He had probably already joined the patrol. Mouth stretched open in a yawn, she slipped out of her den and into camp.

The coming of night had already brought a chill to the breeze that ruffled Darkpaw's fur, diminished only slightly by the sun's last dying rays as it set over the distant treetops. Darkpaw flicked her tail, taking a moment to bathe in the last sunlight of the day.

"Darkpaw!" called a voice, and she turned. "Oh, good, you're already up," said Spottedfire, padding up behind her. "Scarletblaze is waiting." Darkpaw scowled at the mention of the red-furred she-cat. She reluctantly followed her mentor to where the warrior was sitting impatiently, golden eyes glowing with annoyance.

"Where's Bearpaw?" she demanded as soon as Darkpaw and Spottedfire padded up.

"None of your business," snapped Darkpaw without thinking.

"Darkpaw!" scolded Spottedfire. "I'm sorry, she's a bit tired." Darkpaw opened her mouth to say something, but Spottedfire shushed her.

"Whatever," muttered Scarletblaze.

"What I was trying to say," said Darkpaw, with a slight growl in her voice. "Is that he went out hunting on his own earlier. He'll be back soon, but he said that he had permission from Echostar to miss this patrol." A lie, of course. Spottedfire gazed at her piercingly, unconvinced but unwilling to say anything. Scarletblaze grunted.

"Fine," she growled. "Let's get going, then."

The trio padded out of camp. The forest was dark and cold as the dying sunset rays burned from a brilliant amber to a deep scarlet. Darkpaw shivered.

Spottedfire sent Darkpaw off to do some solo hunting while she and Scarletblaze went off to hunt together. She said it was because two cats could hunt better than three, but Darkpaw suspected the real reason was to separate the apprentice and senior warrior before any real arguments broke out. Darkpaw didn't particularly like this thought, but part of her was relieved to not have to be with Scarletblaze while she hunted.

She decided to head to the center of the territory. She moved quietly through the sparse trees until she heard what she was listening for. She lowered herself to the ground. There was a squirrel, only a few mouselengths away from the tree. Darkpaw crept around the trunk, positioning herself between the squirrel and its tree. She moved a few pawsteps forward, bunching her muscles.

She launched herself forward, her underbelly just skimming the ground. She pressed her paws on the squirrel, quickly nipping the back of its' throat. She lifted it, closing her eyes in a quick thanks to

the Light Ones. It was a Dawn Patrol, so there wasn't time for much hunting. Carrying her squirrel, Darkpaw circled back to the StormClan border, which was nearby. She left a scent marking on the tree before heading back to where the patrol agreed to meet up.

Scarletblaze and Spottedfire were already waiting, Spottedfire carrying a large crow.

"Finally," muttered Scarletblaze.

"Did you mark the StormClan border?" asked Spottedfire, dropping the robin.

"Yep," replied Darkpaw, slightly muffled around her squirrel. Spottedfire nodded in approval.

The patrol turned back around, padding to camp. By now, the sun had completely set, and the patrol relied on the moonlight and their instincts to show them the way home. The air was frigid.

Darkpaw padded into camp distracted. But she had just entered before a dark shape ran up to her. It took Darkpaw a moment to realize that it was Leopardpaw, green-gold eyes wide with horror, blazing through the darkness. They were filled with tears.

"Leopardpaw?" said Darkpaw, eyes widening in concern. Leopardpaw took a few moments, trying to catch her breath between sobs. "B-B-" she started, chest heaving. "Bearpaw- " What she said next caused Darkpaw to drop her squirrel as her blood ran ice cold with horror.

"Bearpaw's dead!"

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 9

Darkpaw sat silently, too hollow with grief to even cry. Leopardpaw pressed into her side, muzzle buried in her neck. Nearby, Quailstep was absolutely silent, tears flooding down her cheeks, pressed against her mate. The whole Clan was silent with sadness, Echostar standing stoic in the center of the solemn circle. Echostar took a deep breath and rose to her paws, long, dark fur rippling in the breeze.

"We are gathered here once more today to honor the passing of another beloved apprentice to this Clan. Bearpaw was a promising and kind apprentice, beloved by those around him and his parents, Quailstep and Duskglow, and his sisters, Leopardpaw and Graypaw, who also departed from us far before her time." The Clan was silent. There was so much death. It weighed heavily on each cat, like a dark blanket. Above, dark storm clouds had gathered, lightning flashing between their swirling masses, pushing the sunrise into a darkened gray. A drop of rain fell from the sky, splattering a Darkpaw's paws. She glanced upwards as thunder shook the quiet land, and the rain began to pour.

"May our ancestors watch over this young apprentice as he joins the ranks of them. He has our blessings, and he will have theirs. Whether one of dark or light, he will serve them as faithfully as he did in life.

"To honor the passing of his spirit to the world that lies beyond ours, we will burn his body to release his mortal ties." She gave a tiny nod to the elders, who padded up, dragging his body. He looked so small, in death. He had been larger than any of the other apprentices, but with his paws curled to his chest and his head dipped down, Darkpaw found herself with the realization that he had been so young when he died. Who knows who he could have

been? But now he was taken away for good. She gritted her teeth, hardly able to bear it.

Toothmarks like that of a wild animal lined his throat, parting the fur. Starlingcall and Whisperfoot laid him down, stepping back respectfully. Echostar moved forward, and Darkpaw watched as she gently drew her paw down across his eyes, closing them as if he were only sleeping. She then leaned down, hauling him up by his scruff. The Clan looked on in silence as she hauled herself up the volcano, her movements noticeably slow and rigid. *Was she really that old?* Darkpaw wondered to herself as Echostar made it up to the top. She straightened, and like with Graypaw, Darkpaw saw her lips move softly in what she assumed to be some kind of prayer. She then dropped Bearpaw into the volcano and straightened up again.

"Dismissed," she murmured, her voice heavy.

"Echostar was his grandmother, you know," murmured a voice behind Darkpaw. She glanced up to see Spottedfire, the she-cat's dull blue eyes still wet with tears. "I can't imagine how hard it must be for her to see her grandchildren die."

"Wait, really?" asked Darkpaw, tilting her gaze up and wiping away her own tears. She nodded.

"I think Leopardpaw needs you right now," said Spottedfire softly, glancing towards the light brown she-cat. Darkpaw hesitated, gazing at Spottedfire. "What's wrong?" her mentor said softly, almost a whisper.

"I'm scared she'll blame me," admitted Darkpaw, staring forlornly at her paws. Spottedfire was quiet.

"I'm not sure what you mean by that." Darkpaw's pelt prickled.

"Never mind," she mumbled, standing up. "I'll talk to her."

She padded slowly over to where Leopardpaw was.

"They're all dead," she muttered in a hollow voice as Darkpaw approached. "Everyone around me is dead." Darkpaw was silent, having no idea how to respond.

"I'm... I'm so sorry," she mumbled. Leopardpaw turned away.

"It's not your fault." *But it is,* thought Darkpaw. *I got Bearpaw killed. I let Graypaw get killed. Everything is my fault.*

But I can still save Leopardpaw.

"You need to stay away from Brightpaw," Darkpaw blurted suddenly. Leopardpaw narrowed her eyes.

"...Why?"

"I-" Darkpaw hesitated, glancing around for the dark tabby pelt of Brightpaw. "I... can't say. Just please... trust me." Leopardpaw held her gaze for a moment longer.

"Okay," she said at last. "I trust you."

"Thank you," whispered Darkpaw, pressing her cheek against Leopardpaw's, who twined her tail with Darkpaw's.

"Of course," whispered Leopardpaw.

Morning's golden light cut through the canopy of trees as Darkpaw padded through the forest with the rest of her border patrol. Spottedfire kept an even pace with her apprentice, while Leaftrail trotted at the front, accompanied by Darkglimmer just behind him. At the back of the patrol padded Ashrain quietly, tail swishing through the air behind her.

"Let's make this quick," said Leaftrail loudly so that the back of the patrol could hear. "We check RainClan border, along the Great River. We can hit the edge of StormClan too if we make it before Sunhigh." The patrol chorused their agreements.

They had almost reached the Great River when Darkpaw pricked her ears at a rustling noise and hesitated.

"Darkpaw?" said Darkglimmer, padding over to her daughter. "What is it?" Darkpaw narrowed her eyes, tail-tip flicking.

"There's someone there," she hissed, and the rustling stopped as if it

had heard her. The patrol moved cautiously forward.

"Don't make a move," growled Leaftrail. "Whoever's there could be dangerous." Ashrain blinked, pricking her ears.

Spottedfire moved forward cautiously, Leaftrail right behind her.

Leaftrail suddenly lunged forward with a ferocious snarl.

"RainClan!" came her voice from the other side of the undergrowth. The patrol burst through after her to spot three smaller RainClan cats, likely apprentices. They froze, a mouse scampering out from under one's half-lifted paw. Then they turned and tried to scamper away.

"After them!" yowled Leaftrail, bounding forward. Darkpaw didn't hesitate as she went after them like a shot. She barreled into one- a dark gray dappled tom with green eyes- and shoved him to the ground.

He was a good deal bigger than her, but Darkpaw didn't let that stop her. She noticed his eyes narrow as he glanced suddenly at her paws, and she leaped into the air as he tried to sweep her with a large paw. She landed on his head, knocking him into a tree with a crunch. She hesitated for a moment as she noticed dark blood dripping from behind his ear as the tom panted, stumbling back to his feet. Their eyes met, and Darkpaw bit her lip. Without warning, he leaped at her, swiping his claw at her face. It ripped into her cheek, and she hissed with pain. She darted around him. He was slow to react as she grabbed onto his scruff with her teeth, cutting through the thick fur and drawing blood. He snarled, whirling, but Darkpaw danced quickly out of the way. He lashed his tail, unsheathing his claws, but he seemed to think better of it. He spun and ran, and Darkpaw let him go without giving chase.

She panted, blood welling in the wound on her cheek, glaring after the departing tom. She turned back to Spottedfire, who was coming up behind her. The she-cat looked mostly unscathed.

"You did well," she said. "I saw you out of the corner of my eye." Darkpaw nodded, too breathless to speak.

"We should report this to Echostar," said Leaftrail, padding back to the rest of the group. Behind her padded Darkglimmer and Ashrain, who had a small scratch across her nose. Spottedfire nodded.

"This is the kind of thing she'd want to know about," agreed Ashrain softly. Darkglimmer moved quickly over to Darkpaw.

"Goodness, that cheek scratch looks nasty! Are you okay?" she said, giving Darkpaw frantic licks. The tortoiseshell she-cat twisted away.

"I'm *fine*," she huffed, shaking out her pelt. Darkglimmer rolled her eyes, laying her tail over her daughter's shoulders.

By the time the patrol reached camp, the sky was just slightly beginning to darken, the days already growing shorter and shorter. The cold breeze that foretold the coming of winter swept the forest, ruffling the five cat's pelts as they arrived at camp.

"Darkpaw, you should go to Pinesmolder," said Spottedfire. She glanced at Ashrain. "You can go as well," the spotted she-cat suggested, but Ashrain shook her head.

"I'll be alright," she mumbled, tapping her paws lightly on the ground. "It's a little scratch."

"You should still get it checked in case it gets infected."

"Spottedfire's right," chimed in Leaftrail. "Me, Spottedfire, and Darkglimmer can talk to Echostar about what happened." Ashrain dipped her head, giving in, and padded to the Medicine Den alongside Darkpaw.

Pinesmolder glanced up when they padded in, amber eyes glowing in the dim light. He padded up to them, with a short meow of greeting.

"What happened?" he said, nodding to Darkpaw's scratches.

"We ran into some apprentices," said Ashrain. "RainClan." Darkpaw nodded, scowling.

"Spottedfire, Leaftrail, and Darkglimmer are talking to Echostar

about it right now," she added.

"Well, sit down," said Pinesmolder, sorting through some herbs. He hesitated. "I'll be right back. I should have some drying outside right now." He turned, flicking out of sight at the entrance of the den. Ashrain and Darkpaw were left in uncomfortable silence.

"Hey," said Darkpaw at last. "Aren't you one of Pinesmolder's kits?" Ashrain nodded absentmindedly. "How does that work?" asked Darkpaw, bemused.

"...Well," said Ashrain, turning to her at last. "We're both technically adopted. Our old parents, Blacktail and Skyclaw, aren't around anymore. Skyclaw was our Mom- she died giving birth to me and my brother, Sootysnow. Blacktail, our Dad, couldn't really function without Skyclaw, and he left. Pinesmolder's sister, Quailstep, took care of us while we still needed to nurse, then Pinesmolder and Nightstalk raised us from there."

"Does it ever feel awkward?" asked Darkpaw curiously. "I mean, you're not really related." Ashrain hesitated.

"Not really. Why should blood ever matter? It's the love that counts." Darkpaw wanted to say more, but at that moment, Pinesmolder padded back into the den.

"Found them," he said cheerfully, a cluster of herbs in his mouth.

Darkpaw padded out of the den, a greenish mesh plastered on her cheek. Pinesmolder had told her to keep it on for the rest of the day, but she was already sick of it. Ashrain had wanted to stay for a while longer since the young warrior hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her father for a while.

"Oh, there you are," said Spottedfire, padding up to her.

"What did Echostar say?" Darkpaw said immediately. Spottedfire shrugged.

"She didn't say much. She said that she'd look into it. Although, between you and me, she was not happy. I know Echostar, and she tried to hide it, but she is not exactly pleased with RainClan the

moment. She'll probably bring it up at the Gathering."

"The-" Darkpaw started, furrowing her brow, but was interrupted by Echostar, standing on top of a high ledge on the Volcano.

"May all cats old enough to follow the right path gather below Fireledge for a Clan meeting!" Darkpaw followed Spottedfire as she padded over to where the Clan was gathering, moving from out of their dens and into the dying sunlight.

"Tonight the moon is full. Our ancestors will watch over us tonight as we hold the Gathering. With me, I will bring Patterfoot, Leaftrail, Nightstalk, Pinesmolder, Quailstep, Spottedfire, Flamesoot, Ashrain, Brightpaw, Leopardpaw, and Darkpaw. We will leave when the sky is dark." The cats who had not been chosen slipped back into their dens with murmurs of disappointment. Those who were chosen, however, remained outside in the golden rays of the sunset above.

"This is your first gathering, is it not?" asked Spottedfire curiously, and Darkpaw nodded, eyes gleaming with excitement.

"What's it like?" she exclaimed, hardly able to suppress the kit-like squeak in her voice. "It's held in DawnClan camp, right? Does anything ever go wrong? What if-" Spottedfire hushed her with a paw.

"We'll talk about it on our way, okay? For now, try to get at least a bit of rest. You'll be up all night, and you'll want as much sleep as you can get."

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 10

Darkpaw trailed after her Spottedfire as the group of cats silently made their way through the shadowy forest. Night had just begun to creep into the sky, turning everything a deep navy color. Fog swirled and twined around the trees, obscuring everything in a cloud of mist. The moon's silver rays dappled the forest floor, illuminating the cats' small figures as the leaves crunched beneath their paws.

"I can't wait!" whispered Darkpaw excitedly, curling her tail as she moved forward to pad side by side with Spottedfire. The ginger she-cat smiled, flicking her tail.

"I agree it's exciting, but you must remember to not start fights. The gathering is a sacred time. It is of the utmost importance that you don't engage in an argument with another Clan."

"Is it really held in DawnClan camp?" Darkpaw asked, blinking up at Spottedfire. She nodded.

"Indeed it is," she murmured. "DawnClan camp; the center of each of our territories. It is said that StarClan shines brightest there." Darkpaw frowned slightly. Why did StarClan shine bright on DawnClan alone?

But her thoughts were interrupted when the cats reached the Great River. The water was dark and churning, the moonlight glinting off the twisting surface. Echostar paused for a moment at the large log that stretched across over the surface of the river, held steadily in place between two small grooves on either bank. She rested one paw on it, silently pressing on it and testing its strength. After a lengthy pause, she nodded briefly to the rest of her Clan before jumping onto the dark wooden surface. It creaked and groaned

under her weight, but it seemed to hold. One by one, the cats followed her, slipping like shadows into the opposite bank.

Darkpaw watched as Brightpaw effortlessly bounded across, seeming to almost soar through the air, ginger pelt dappled by silver moonlight. Leopardpaw followed, a little slower, but confident, tail whisking in the air as she too disappeared into the opposite bank. Eventually, only Spottedfire and Darkpaw remained silent.

"Are you coming?" murmured Spottedfire, blinking at Darkpaw. Darkpaw shook her head with a sigh.

"Yep, yep." She watched as Spottedfire padded quickly across, and she was the only one remaining alone on the bank. The tall grass swayed softly in the wind around her, the leaves above chattering in the chill night breeze. The silence was nice; comforting, even. Darkpaw was tempted to linger a moment longer, but eventually, she turned back to the bridge.

She unsteadily pressed her paws on the surface. It seemed safe. She took a breath and propelled herself forward, landing squarely on the wooden surface. Below, the water twisted and churned unsettlingly. Darkpaw forced back the lump in her throat as she crept slowly across the bridge. The wood was slick beneath her paws, so she slid out her claws to gain a firmer grip on the log.

Finally, she reached the other side of the bridge and slipped into the bushes.

Spottedfire was the only cat waiting for her, tail-tip flicking somewhat impatiently. On the sight of Darkpaw, she nodded towards where the rear of the group's tails had just flicked out of view. Darkpaw bounded forward quickly, following her mentor as they moved to catch up with the rest of the patrol.

"Here we are," said Spottedfire as they pushed through one last hedgerow.

DawnClan camp was a wide, open clearing, surrounded by a few thick copses of trees. A thicket of brambles bordered the northern

end, and patches of lavender and clovers grew amongst the edges. In the center grew a massive oak tree, branches spread wide at the top before curling slightly in again, resembling a flower that had not quite yet bloomed. The tree was coated in tiny pink and white flowers, and small scratch marks lined the surface. It almost seemed to have a glow to it, casting the cats in golden light like thousands of stars. Cats of all shapes and sizes were gathered around, murmuring quietly among themselves. Darkpaw caught sight of some older cats who must be the elders watching with relaxed gazes from the shelter of a large overhanging stone. Apprentices chattered merrily among themselves, making exaggerated gestures and laughing.

Upon reaching their destination, Pinesmolder slipped away to go meet with the medicine cats. Echostar dipped her head to the rest of her Clan, and padded up to the great tree, accompanied by Coldflurry.

On a low, wide branch of the tree sat four cats already. The first was a tall, long-furred black she-cat with narrow, blazing golden eyes. Her tail was curled over her delicate forepaws, and she watched the cats below her with an even, confident gaze.

The second was another long-furred she-cat. Her fur was gray, but it had an odd lavender tinge to it, almost giving the she-cat an ethereal appearance. Her green-blue eyes were warm and soft, and she wore a relaxed half-smile.

The third was a massive light gray she-cat. Her eyes were a fierce, stormy gray. Her fur was spotted with dark gray and speckled between with white. Her face looked intimidating, but in a comforting way, as if in a pinch, this cat would always take your side.

The last, sitting right on the edge of the branch, was a tall ginger she-cat. Her eyes had an odd discoloration; One was a sky-blue, the other a dull gold. She observed the surrounding cats with a look of mild interest, tail dangling in the air.

As Echostar leaped up to join the other leaders, they all moved to make room, mewing quick greetings. Coldflurry sat amongst the

other deputies near the roots, dipping her head and exchanging polite conversation.

"This is where I leave you," said Spottedfire, nodding her head to Darkpaw. The tortoiseshell she-cat glanced up, slightly startled.

"Oh- Right." Spottedfire smiled, tapping Darkpaw lightly on the shoulder with her tail.

"Have a fun time, hm?" Darkpaw watched as her mentor disappeared into the crowd of cats. Her pelt prickled uneasily as she gazed around at all the strangers.

"Hey, Darkpaw!" said Leopardpaw, padding up behind her.

"Huh?" said Darkpaw, flicking her tail.

"I have some apprentices I want you to meet! Come on!" Darkpaw followed quickly, relieved to have someone to introduce her.

"Hey!" greeted Leopardpaw to the group of apprentices when they arrived. "This is Darkpaw! Darkpaw, meet Crowpaw, Windpaw, Sandpaw, Silverpaw, Stonepaw, and Batpaw!"

"Nice to meet you!" exclaimed the white she-cat who Darkpaw assumed was Windpaw.

"It's always great to meet someone new," agreed Silverpaw, a dusty gray she-cat who reminded Darkpaw painfully of how Graypaw used to look.

Darkpaw nodded, forcing a smile. Windpaw and Sandpaw especially seemed to be very energetic, tails flicking excitedly back and forth. They had quickly launched into a bragging competition about each of their latest feats.

Meanwhile, Stonepaw, Silverpaw, and Batpaw seemed a bit quieter. They chattered amongst themselves a bit but seemed to have resigned themselves to chuckling in regards to Windpaw and Sandpaw's antics.

Crowpaw seemed to be the most nervous, hanging back while the

others talked among themselves. Darkpaw frowned slightly, before moving over to the tom.

He was a very dark brown- nearly black. He had a splash of white across his chest, and his eyes were a dark, forestry green- though it was hard to tell, as he spent most of his time staring at his paws.

"Hey," said Darkpaw awkwardly. Crowpaw glanced up, looking startled.

"Er- Hi," he said, blinking.

"So, umm... Crowpaw, was it?" asked Darkpaw, starting to regret her decision to initiate conversation.

"Yeah. You're Darkpaw, right?" Darkpaw nodded.

"So... Uh... what Clan are you from?"

"Oh, I'm in StormClan."

"That's cool, I'm EmberClan!"

"Cool!"

"Yeah."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment, both staring at their paws. *StarClan, why is this so hard?* thought Darkpaw.

"So, umm... I'm training to be a medicine cat," said Crowpaw, interrupting the silence.

"Oh, really?" asked Darkpaw, intrigued. "Shouldn't you be sitting with the other medicine cats, then?" Crowpaw shrugged.

"I guess, but there aren't any other medicine cat apprentices, and it gets kinda boring." Darkpaw nodded, flicking her tail.

"Yeah, I could see that. So, is this your first gathering too?" Crowpaw brightened up, nodding.

"Yeah, it is! I didn't expect DawnClan to feel so..." he was silent for

a moment, searching for the words.

"Magical?" said Darkpaw.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"I think so too." Darkpaw and Crowpaw gazed at each other for a moment, each silent. A sort of tension seemed to pull taut between them, neither able to pull their gaze from the other.

"And then," exclaimed Windpaw, breaking the tension. "I leaped, as high as I could, and I caught it!"

"No way!" said Leopardpaw, flicking her tail. "You didn't catch a *hawk*!"

"Yeah I did! Tell 'em, Crowpaw!" Crowpaw and Darkpaw pulled their gazes apart.

"Well, it wasn't as much of a hawk, I guess. More of a large-"

"Whatever," snorted Windpaw, flicking her tail.

"May every cat be silent! The gathering is about to begin!" A loud voice cut across the clearing, and the chattering gradually became quiet.

The black she-cat from earlier had risen to her paws. Once the surrounding cats had become quiet, she sat back down, nodding to the other leaders. "Who wants to lead our gathering tonight?"

"I will begin," said Opalstar.

"Oh!" whispered Leopardpaw in a hushed voice as they began talking. "That's right, it's some of your first gatherings! So, the black cat that just silenced the gathering's name is Ebonystar. She's the leader of DawnClan. The kinda purply one is Heatherstar, and she leads RainClan. GustClan's leader is the light gray one, her name's Wanderingstar. Opalstar is the leader of StormClan, she's the ginger one. Last, the dark gray one is Echostar, and she's the EmberClan leader."

Stonepaw hushed her.

"Shh! They're talking!"

"Though prey has been becoming more uncommon," said Opalstar. "We are still doing just fine. One of our warriors, Petalspot, has moved to the nursery with the birth of her son, Nightkit." Calls of 'Nightkit! Nightkit!' spread around the gathered cats. Darkpaw noticed the StormClan cats especially raised their voices.

"GustClan will go next," said Wanderingstar gruffly, nodding to Opalstar, who sat back down. "We do not have much news to share, but Kitetrot has moved into the nursery expecting kits. Prey is running as well as ever. That is all." Wanderingstar returned to her spot as Heatherstar rose to her paws.

"Prey in RainClan has been especially plentiful this season," she purred. "StarClan has been watching over us. We would also like to welcome the addition of three new warriors! Patchedfur, Sunsetbloom, and Ripplepelt!" She paused as cheers spread across the gathering. "Ebonystar, would you like to go next?" Ebonystar dipped her head. "Echostar, why don't you finish us off."

"Prey has been running well," called Echostar. "We have suffered the losses of two of our apprentices, Bearpaw and Graypaw." As the gathered cats rose their voices in condolence for the deaths, Batpaw turned to Leopardpaw.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured. "I know they were your siblings."

"Yeah, that's terrible," mumbled Silverpaw. Leopardpaw nodded her head in thanks, but she turned her head away. Darkpaw twined her tail with the other apprentices', and Leopardpaw leaned into Darkpaw's shoulder.

"However, we do have one last bit of news to share." The gathered cats perked up, tilting their ears curiously. Echostar rose to her paws, fur rippling intimidatingly in the wind. Her golden eyes became slits as she spoke. "RainClan has been trespassing on our territory," she hissed, glaring at Heatherstar. The soft she-cat looked surprised.

"Echostar, I can assure you, we have not been trespassing."

"You very well have," Echostar growled. "Darkpaw! Come up here!" Darkpaw froze, suddenly put on the spot. She felt hundreds of eyes on her, burning into her pelt. She couldn't move.

Leopardpaw pressed against her side, gently nosing her forward. She reluctantly moved with a shaky sigh. She bunched her muscles, propelling herself upward next to Echostar.

The other leaders eyed her with disdain.

"See these scratches?" hissed Echostar, gesturing to the scars that still lingered on her cheek. "She got that from a RainClan cat!"

Pandemonium erupted. The gathering suddenly became loud- all too loud. Cats were arguing, spitting.

"That doesn't prove anything, she could have got those scars from anywhere!"

"I always knew you couldn't trust RainClan!"

"StarClan, my ears hurt!"

"Silence!" roared Ebonystar, her voice cutting through the chaos. A hush fell over the gathering. Ebonystar sighed, tail cutting through the air. "I will not have this gathering lead to battle," she said, voice calm and even. "The gathering is over."

As the cats were dispersing, Darkpaw leaped down from the branch to go say her goodbyes to the other apprentices.

Nobody said anything about Echostar's accusations, though the goodbyes were short and polite. Stonepaw and Batpaw especially seemed silent, though Darkpaw guessed that was because her leader had just made claims against their Clan.

Darkpaw began to second guess herself as she made her way slowly back through the gathering. What if the patrol they had run into was just a trio of rouges that had somehow got through the border? It was possible. It'd happened before.

"...We need to do something about it." Darkpaw froze as her ears tilted to the sound of the murmured voice. Slowly, silently, she crept across the ground, concealing herself in a soft thicket of bushes. The leaves tickled her nose, and she resisted the urge to sneeze.

Isolated from the rest of the gathering sat two of the leaders from before; Heatherstar and Wanderingstar.

"Do something about what?" said Heatherstar, blinking at Wanderingstar. She gestured towards the gathering.

"Look at EmberClan! Throwing random accusations like this! They haven't done things like this since the War of Stars!"

Heatherstar frowned. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions," she murmured warily. "Let's just wait, and see what happens."

Wanderingstar sighed. "Fine. We'll wait. But tell me if anything does happen." The two leaders dipped their heads to each other before moving silently away.

"Darkpaw!" Darkpaw pricked her ears at the call. She quietly crept out of the bush. "Darkpaw!" Spottedfire was calling for her, standing in the middle of the slowly departing gathering.

"I'm here, I'm here," said Darkpaw wearily, padding up to her. Now that the excitement was all over, she was about ready to flop down on a nest that was so covered in thorns it made her look like a hedgehog.

Spottedfire nodded. "Come on. The Clan is waiting." The two cats trailed back up to where the rest of EmberClan was standing.

"So, how was your first gathering?" asked Spottedfire with a smile as they began to pad back. The sun was just beginning to rise, turning the sky dark shades of gray and pink. The rays cut from just over the horizon.

"It was... interesting."

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 11

"May all cats old enough to follow the right path gather beneath Fireledge for a Clan meeting!" Darkpaw glanced up suddenly at Echostar's powerful call, and Leopardstrike, sitting just beside her, gave her a friendly nudge.

"It's finally your turn!" she grinned, tail swishing through the air, and Darkpaw's eyes gleamed with excitement.

"R-Right!" she exclaimed, hardly able to contain herself. "I'll- Uh-"

"Just go!" meowed Leopardstrike, butting her forward with her head. Darkpaw stumbled towards the Fireledge before catching herself. She shot a playful glare at Leopardstrike, who smirked back and mouthed, 'Go!'.

Darkpaw made her way slowly to stand in front of the Fireledge, heart pounding. As it turned out, the day of Darkpaw's warrior's ceremony happened to be perfect. By now, the trees were shades of red and orange and their leaves littered the ground, crunching beneath Darkpaw's pads. The sun was warm and bright, but the cool wind evened out the heat into a nice in-between temperature.

Darkpaw took a deep breath. She had almost even forgotten about what had happened a few moons prior, and the losses they had suffered.

Almost.

She shook her head, pushing the thoughts from her mind as she straightened up before the Fireledge, side by side with her sister, Brightpaw.

Honestly, Darkpaw was surprised that Brightpaw hadn't become a warrior sooner. Brightpaw could already out-hunt any of the warriors in EmberClan, and fight and win against at least two of their middling fighters. But she didn't question it, in any case.

Echostar stood tall, outlined against the moss-covered rock of the volcano, gray fur rippling in the wind. She wore a soft smile on her face.

"I, Echostar, leader of EmberClan," she called. "call upon our warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn.

"Brightpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Brightpaw straightened, lifting her chin. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Brightpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Brightgleam. StarClan honors your nobility and skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of EmberClan.

"And do you, Darkpaw, also promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Darkpaw felt her heartbeat quicken. This was it. The moment she had been waiting for her whole life. She felt light-headed.

"I do," she managed to say, without the slightest tremor in her voice.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Darkpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Darkfire. StarClan honors your nobility and spirit, and we welcome you as a full warrior of EmberClan."

The Clan erupted into cheers. "Brightgleam! Darkfire! Brightgleam! Darkfire!" Echostar leaped down from the Fireledge, and rested her muzzle on each newly named warrior's head in turn. Darkfire quickly found herself surrounded by approval.

"You're finally a warrior!" exclaimed Leopardstrike, bumping her cheerfully.

"Congratulations," purred Quailstep, padding forward alongside Duskglow.

"I couldn't have trained you better myself!" exclaimed Batmask. "Well... maybe..." But a swat from his sister, Spottedfire, shut him up.

"You did excellent," murmured Spottedfire, fierce approval in her voice.

"Cool name," remarked Ashrain quietly but cheerfully from a few steps away.

Eventually, the crowd dispersed, and Darkfire was left alone, beaming alongside Leopardstrike. Coldflurry padded up to them, green eyes glowing happily.

"Why don't you two go on a patrol, now that you're warriors? Just the two of you?"

"We would love that!" Leopardstrike declared, jumping to her paws. Darkfire grinned.

"Race you to the StormClan border," she challenged mischievously, batting at Leopardstrike and racing away. She heard the sound of Leopardstrike's pawsteps as she raced after her.

Darkfire sprinted through the undergrowth, movements fluid and calculated. Leopardstrike soon overtook her, her long legs boosting her over a fallen log that Darkfire had to pause before she scrambled over. It felt just like it had when the two were apprentices.

But now we don't have Bearpaw. Or Graypaw.

Darkfire slowed to a trot as the dark memories resurfaced. Leopardstrike, a few tail-lengths ahead of her, paused, turning around with mild concern in her eyes. She moved quickly back over to Darkfire to pad alongside her friend.

"What's wrong?" she murmured, greenish gold eyes glinting with worry. Her eyes looked like sunshine peeking through a canopy of leaves, glowing through the shadows of the forest with concern. Darkfire hesitated, tail-tip twitching uncertainly. "You can tell me," Leopardstrike mumbled, pressing against Darkfire. Darkfire let some of her weight rest on the taller she-cat with a sigh.

"Just thinking..." She paused, finding it suddenly difficult to talk. "...About Graypaw and Bearpaw..." She cut herself off, noticing the strained choke in her own voice. Leopardstrike's eyes darkened briefly, and Darkfire turned away. She hadn't wanted to remind Leopardstrike about her siblings. "It's okay, I can leave if you want to-" Darkfire started, starting to turn away from Leopardstrike, but the light brown she-cat rested her paw on Darkfire's shoulders. Darkfire's eyes met hers. Leopardstrike looked sad- Angry, even- but there was no hint of blame in those eyes.

"It's okay," she whispered, pressing her cheek against Darkfire's. "I promise it wasn't your fault. It was just..." She paused. "It was so unfair."

"I know," said Darkfire softly. Everything was silent, save for the rustling of the treetops and the piercing song of a cardinal somewhere. Leopardstrike seemed to shake herself.

"Enough of that, let's get hunting," she said in a decided manner, and Darkfire didn't have any intention of continuing the painful topic. The two she-cats picked up their pace, continuing padding to the StormClan border.

Darkfire bounded ahead as the trees parted, opening into the wide stretch of beach. The ocean waves lapped at the smooth sand. Darkfire grinned, turning back to Leopardstrike.

"What do you say we try to catch some fish?"

Leopardstrike made a face.

"Catching fish is hard enough on its own, and you want me to do it in the *ocean*?" Darkfire shrugged with a grin.

"How hard can it be?" Leopardstrike rolled her eyes but followed Darkfire to the water.

"That is freezing," deadpanned Leopardstrike as her paws touched the icy ocean water. Darkfire couldn't help a shiver.

"I bet it won't be if you just jump in," she purred, and Leopardstrike gave her an exaggerated look of horror.

"You are ridiculou-" she started, but Darkfire turned, bunching her hind legs before propelling herself into the ocean.

Shocks of ice shot through her body, and a stream of bubbles escaped her mouth. Every part of her seemed to burn with the sheer cold. She pushed against the sandy ground (Suppressing a gag at the slimy texture of the seaweed that lined it) and flew into the air. She scrambled out of the waves, saltwater dripping from her soggy, matted fur as Leopardstrike laughed hysterically.

"You look fantastic," she snorted between giggles. Darkfire grumbled something about chopping off heads.

"I don't *feel* fantastic," the tortoiseshell she-cat muttered, shaking her fur rapidly. Droplets of water flew into the air, and Leopardstrike scrambled back.

"We're acting like kits," the tall she-cat remarked, and Darkfire gave her a pointed look.

"So...?"

"Point taken." The two glanced back towards the forest.

"What do you say we try to catch some prey before the sun sets?" Darkfire mused, glancing back at the slowly darkening sky. Leopardstrike nodded.

"We could try," she agreed.

The two she-cats padded back into camp. They had only caught a finch between them after Darkfire missed a leap when trying to snag a mouse. Darkfire was still dejected as they came back into

camp, despite Leopardstrike's constant reassurances that no, she was not the worst hunter in all the Clans, and desperately wanted to keep hunting to make up for her mistake, but the sky was already turning shades of scarlet as the night crept in.

Leopardstrike dropped the finch in the fresh-kill pile as they passed, and Darkglimmer rushed towards Darkfire the moment she made it back.

"Darkpa-" she started, but caught herself. "Darkfire! I thought that you had died, for StarClan's sake! What took you so long? And why are you so wet?" Darkfire exclaimed a look with Leopardstrike, who gave a subtle giggle.

"Er- Never mind that," said Darkfire, starting up towards the apprentice's den, but Leopardstrike poked her with a paw, giving her a fake cough.

"Ahem, Darkfire?" Darkfire paused, staring at Leopardstrike with confusion, before remembering.

"Oh, right," she said, slightly embarrassed. "Sorry." Leopardstrike flicked her tail in a 'No, don't be', gesture.

"Remember when I did the exact same thing when I was first made a warrior?" she snorted. "I was half asleep before you woke me up and reminded me that I was in the wrong den."

"I remember that," purred Darkfire somewhat sheepishly.

Darkglimmer smiled at the two younger warriors.

"I'll leave you both to it," she smiled, before turning to head to the warriors' den. Leopardstrike and Darkfire glanced at each other before padding after her.

Darkfire hadn't found it *too* hard to sleep in her new den, but as she was prodded awake by an insistent paw, she didn't feel particularly rested.

"Darkfire!" called someone. "Get up!" Darkfire's eyes flickered open, and she met those of Leopardstrike's. She groaned, squinting out the

entrance. The sky was pitch-black outside, sprinkled only with a few stars.

"Leopardstrike, what in StarClan? It's the middle of the night!" Darkfire tried to roll over to go back to sleep, but she was interrupted by an ear-splitting scream that came from the den below her.

"Charredlog is having her kits!" Leopardstrike exclaimed, pushing her a little harder. "The whole Clan's up! Something's gone wrong!" Darkfire shook her head wearily, struggling to her paws.

"Wait- Now?"

"Yes now!" exclaimed Leopardstrike, the trace of a hiss in her voice. "Come on!" Darkfire scrambled after Leopardstrike, still blinking sleepily.

"But it's like, a moon early!"

"I know!" Leopardstrike flicked her tail, turning to look at Darkfire. "Pinesmolder is really worried. He says he needs the warriors' help."

Leopardstrike and Darkfire raced down the side of the volcano, coming to a stop outside the nursery. Charredlog screamed again, and there was the sound of a concerned Featherglow, the only permanent nursery queen, calmly consoling her. Batmask, Charredlog's mate, paced around frantically outside the nursery, flexing his claws with fear. Pinesmolder sat inside the nursery, his hunched-over shape illuminated by moonlight. Barring the entrance from the concerned crowd of cats that had gathered stood Coldflurry.

"A stick!" hollered Pinesmolder from inside, his voice tense. "Someone get a stick! A strong one!"

"Darkfire," snapped Coldflurry at random. "You can get a stick."

"Cobwebs!"

"Batmask, you can fetch more cobwebs."

"But-" started Batmask with a terrified glance at the nursery entrance.

"Go!" hissed Coldflurry, flexing her claws, and Batmask ran off. Darkfire stood frozen for a moment before Leopardstrike gave her a fierce nudge.

"You heard Coldflurry! Get a move on!" Darkfire gave a quick nod before racing off, her paws pounding the earth.

A stick, she thought. *I need a stick. A strong one.*

She slowed slightly as she entered the forest, gaze darting around. Some twigs littered the ground, but they were flimsy and cracked when Darkfire stepped on them. Darkfire continued into the forest, heart pounding, but away from the commotion, she found it easier to regain her wits.

The night was dark and silent, and Darkfire felt uneasy in the blackness. Leaves crunched underfoot as she padded forward, scanning the trees and undergrowth for anything that might do. She was so preoccupied, that she didn't hear the faint rustling and quiet footsteps behind her.

Darkfire continued forward, ears pressed to her head with anxiety. Her gaze finally alighted on a tree. Somewhat low to the ground was a branch, but the tree wasn't fully grown. If Darkfire somehow got her teeth around the flimsy branch and pulled it down, it would make the perfect stick.

She rose to her hind paws, resting her forepaws on the trunk as she debated how she would get up there. But she froze when she heard a low growl behind her. One wild, and full of menace.

Darkfire had just enough time to dart out of the way as a ginger blur shot out of the undergrowth, fangs snapping at the place where Darkfire had just been with enough force to crack her skull.

The beast turned to Darkfire, narrow eyes black and cold. It had a long, pointed snout and its fangs were long and sharp, dripping with saliva. It had a short, ginger coat and a large, tufted tail.

A fox.

Darkfire and the fox stared at each other for a moment. Darkfire was frozen with terror, and the fox's gaze had a kind of ferocious calm to it, as if it knew that it had Darkfire cornered. Darkfire took a step back, and a leaf crunched beneath her paw. As if on cue, the fox lunged forward, snapping ferociously. Darkfire was just barely able to manage stumbling to the side. She felt its hot breath on her fur as it passed, and the wind of its jaws ruffled her pelt. It turned with a fierce snarl, but Darkfire was already leaping out of the way. There was no way she could fight a fox on her own. Her only option was to flee.

As it shot towards her again, Darkfire scrambled back. It whirled on her, snapping at her face as she ducked. She twisted under it but was yanked back as it got a grip on her tail-tip. She yowled with pain as its jaws cut into her fur, and she was finally able to pull away, hissing and wincing. The fox spat out a tuft of her fur, and a spot of blood dripped from its chin. Darkfire turned and ran, ran for her life. Her paws slammed against the ground. Brambles and thorns tugged back at her pelt as if trying to slow her down, but she barreled through them, terror driving her forward faster than she could have ever thought possible.

Eventually, the hot breath had gone from her back, and the sounds of the fox's pawsteps had faded. Darkfire slowed to a trot, chest-heaving with exhaustion.

She stumbled back into camp, panting, and was immediately greeted by Leopardstrike.

"Where were you?" she demanded, tail lashing. "We had to send another cat to fetch a stick instead of you!" Darkfire's breath hitched. She had completely forgotten about Charredlog.

"Did-"

"Yeah, Charredlog had her kits." Leopardstrike looked sad for a minute. "There were supposed to be four, but she lost two of them."

"Oh," said Darkfire, staring at her paws. *If she had been a bit faster...*

could she have been able to save them? Leopardstrike must have recognized the look on her face, because the she-cat shook her head.

"No, it wasn't your fault. They were stillborn. It wouldn't have mattered if you had gotten back faster or not." Leopardstrike narrowed her eyes, peering at Darkfire. "But what *did* happen?" Darkfire frowned slightly, gazing back at Leopardstrike.

"I-" She glanced up. The sky was beginning to brighten slightly. She took a breath. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow. Promise." Leopardstrike still wore a small frown, but she nodded.

"Okay. But I think, for now, we both need to get some sleep."

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 12

Darkfire yawned as she padded after the rest of the Dawn Patrol. Beams of the early sunlight glimmered through the trees, tracing the cats' pelts and dappling them with silvery sunlight.

In front of her padded Patterfoot, Batmask, and Duskglow in silence, their footfalls so quiet they almost seemed like shadows. Morning dew dappled the grass and dripped from the canopy above.

They came to a stop near a large rock formation.

"Let's split up," called Patterfoot back to the rest of the patrol, turning towards them. "Batmask, take the RainClan border. Duskglow, check a bit further along the Great River; where it curves away from our territory. Darkfire, you can check up by the beaches near StormClan. I'll check the Overgrowth. Meet back here-" She gestured with her tail towards the odd stones. "-when you're finished." The patrol chorused their agreements before slipping off to go their separate ways.

It had been a few days since Charredlog had given birth to her kits. Of course, she and her mate, Batmask, had been distraught since the loss of the two stillborns. Darkfire often wondered privately if that was the real reason that Coldflurry kept Batmask so busy on patrols; to distract him from his grief. Darkfire knew she was probably overthinking it, but she couldn't help herself.

As she altered her course slightly she wondered whether she'd ask to see the kits today. Most of the Clan had already gotten a chance to visit, and she felt kind of left out. Even Echostar, leader of the Clan, had found time to visit. She wondered privately if she was procrastinating, putting it off.

She pushed her way out of the trees and the wind quickly blew her

ears back, pressing her fur behind her. She shivered. Winter would be arriving soon, along with the famine and cold that came with it. She shook her head, tail-tip flicking. The volcano would provide a shelter from the cold, and Coldflurry would probably double hunting patrols. They would be fine.

As Darkfire padded along the StormClan border, she thought she heard shuffling in the bushes a few pawsteps away. Instinctively, she dropped into a crouch, whiskers twitching. She opened her mouth slightly, and the scent of a mouse wafted from the bush. She moved slowly, carefully, until she was crouching in between the mouse and the border, so that it wouldn't flee across. With tensions so high between the Clans, it wouldn't do to be trespassing right now. Not even on an ally's border.

Darkfire took a step forward, pausing. She bunched her hind legs and shot forward, belly fur barely skimming the ground. She collided into the bush, but as the mouse attempted to skitter away, and slammed her paw down. She stood, muttering a hesitant thanks to the Light Ones of StarClan before picking up the mouse. She carried it over to a large tree before quickly burying it for later. She turned back around, continuing the pad up the border, marking it as she went.

An unusual sound behind her made her freeze, cold terror shooting up her. Her pelt prickled uneasily, and she whirled with a hiss. She disturbed the blackbird that had accidentally disturbed the branch it had landed on. It chirped scornfully at her before taking off in a flurry of dark feathers. Darkfire glared at her paws with a sigh. She was so *jumpy* lately. She shook herself, padding back over to recollect her mouse. Despite herself, she still couldn't shake the feeling that there were constantly a burning pair of eyes trained on her. Ignoring the shivers that continually went up her spine, she padded back to where the patrol had agreed to meet, vanishing from sight in the shadows of the forest.

The sun had risen slightly by the time that Batmask arrived at where the rest of the patrol was already waiting. With a glance at him, Patterfoot gave a quick nod.

"Right then, let's head back." She turned away.

Darkfire couldn't help but noticed the two large squirrels that dangled from Batmask's jaws. She gave him a questioning look, but he didn't seem to notice her.

Food for Charredlog? Darkfire thought to herself as she fell in step at the back of the patrol. She wouldn't be surprised. Batmask had been doting on the queen for the past few days. She couldn't help but wonder if she would ever be loved that way.

Stupid question, she chided herself, setting her gaze forward.

When the patrol padded into camp, Darkfire paused at the prey pile to drop her mouse. Upon seeing their arrival, Coldflurry nodded and called out for the next patrol. Darkfire glanced around until she spotted Leopardstrike, relaxing near the entrance of the Warrior den. She hurried over tail curling in the air.

"Hey, Leopardstrike!" she greeted her friend cheerfully as she trotted over. Leopardstrike glanced up, the glare that she had been holding twisting into a grin as she met Darkfire's eyes.

"Hey, Darkfire," she purred as Darkfire settled down beside her. "Still haven't seen the kits yet?" Darkfire rolled her eyes.

"Nope, not yet."

Leopardstrike stood, flicking her tail. "Well, come on, then!" Darkfire gave her a slight frown.

"Are you sure?" she said, but Leopardstrike was already padding away. She sighed and scrambled after her.

Leoparedstrike was waiting for her just outside the nursery with a grin on her face.

"Go ahead," she purred, giving Darkfire a nudge. Darkfire sighed, with a roll of her eyes, but let Leopardstrike push her in.

Closer to the entrance, Featherglow lay, long silver fur glowing in the sunlight that stretched into the nursery. She gave Darkfire a warm smile as she padded in.

"Come to see the kits?" she asked, blinking softly at Darkfire. The she-cat nodded, already feeling a tad embarrassed. Charredlog perked up her head as Darkfire entered, yawning drowsily.

"Mrmph," she said, shaking herself. "I'm assuming you've come to visit the kits?"

"I can leave if you were napping-" Darkfire started, but Charredlog waved her off.

"No, no, it's fine-" She let out an enormous yawn. "You can come have a look."

Carefully, Darkfire stepped into the den. Two bundles of fur were curled in the gentle curve of Charredlog's stomach. Charredlog nudged the kittens, and the tiny things lifted their heads with a chorus of the softest of mews. Their delicate whiskers twitched, and Darkfire's eyes widened.

"They're so precious," she whispered, leaning down to gaze at them. One of the batted at her nose with a tiny paw. "Do they have names yet?" Charredlog nodded with a smile.

"The feisty red and ginger one is called Sunkit," she purred, flicking her tail at the tabby she-kit who had batted at Darkfire's nose. "And the ginger tabby tom is called Leafkit." She nodded towards the other kit, who had his nose pressed against Charredlog's stomach. Darkfire grinned.

"They're adorable," she purred. Her ears pricked as she heard another set of footsteps pad into the den. She turned to see Batmask standing at the entrance, one of the squirrels that he had caught on patrol dangling in his mouth.

"Is that for me?" purred Charredlog, leaning forward. "Oh, thank StarClan, I was *starving*!" Darkfire moved politely to the side to let Batmask through.

"I should be going now," she said hesitantly, standing up.

"You're welcome back any time!" called Featherglow as Darkfire pushed her way out of the den, and she waved her tail in response.

Leopardstrike was waiting for her patiently, tail curled over her paws. When Darkfire reappeared, she stood with a grin.

"Want to go for some hunting?" she asked, and Darkfire stretched with a yawn.

"I suppose," she mumbled.

"Good! I've just been sitting around *all day* and I am *so bored*." Leopardstrike began to trot towards the entrance of the camp, continuing to chatter on, and Darkfire padded exasperatedly after her.

The pair had decided to hunt along RainClan border, partially because the most prey lingered there at this time of year.

"Do you hear that?" muttered Leopardstike, coming to a stop. Darkfire froze as well, ears pricking.

"...No," she mumbled under her breath. "Does it sound like prey? Or predator?"

"Neither," muttered Lopeardstrike, taking a pawstep forward. "A cat."

"Trespassing?" said Darkfire softly, moving forward as well.

"Hard to tell." Leopardstrike angled her ears slightly to the right. "I think whoever it is is over there." Darkfire paused at the sound of more rustling. Then, something shot away in a blur of color. Definately a cat. Leopardstrike started forward to give trace, but Darkfire put a paw on her shoulder.

"It's no use," she hissed, tail lashing. "They're probably already gone." Leopardstrike growled under her breath.

"Coward," she growled, and Darkfire couldn't help but agree. The two she-cats padded over to where the cat must have been crouching, sniffing at the spot.

"RainClan," spat Darkfire, rage beginning to boil in her chest. "*Again*." Leopardstrike scowled.

"Not good?" she said dryly, and Darkfire shook her head.

"We should tell Echostar. We can hunt later," she added, as Leopardstrike's face slightly fell, but the light brown she-cat shook her head.

"No, you're right, this is more important." Darkfire gave a brief nod. They turned, racing back towards camp. This wouldn't be good.

Not at all.

"Echostar?"

"Come in." Darkfire and Leopardstrike shared a nervous look before pushing their way through the hanging ivy outside Echostar's den. The dark gray she-cat's golden eyes burned, and Darkfire couldn't help a shiver.

"We have news," said Leopardstrike gravely.

"Well, go on, then," said Echostar, settling comfortably on her paws.

"Me and Darkfire were on a hunting patrol," Leopardstrike began, taking a step forward. "We heard weird noises coming from a bush, so we went to investigate. Some cat ran out of the bush and back across the border." She hesitated. "We checked out the spot it had left. It... smelled like RainClan." Echostar's face remained impassive, though her claws scraped hard against the ground.

"Thank you, for informing me. Tell Coldflurry that I want her in my den." The she-cat hesitated. "On that thought, get Brightgleam and Pinesmolder as well."

Darkfire narrowed her eyes. "Why Brightgleam?" Echostar fixed her with a fierce stare.

"What cats I choose to confide in is none of your concern," she growled, and Darkfire ducked her head, backing off.

"Of course," she muttered. "We'll be going then." Echostar gave a brief nod, looking distracted. As Darkfire left, she was just able to catch the flash of dark rage that passed across the leader's face, but

just the glimpse of it was able to give Darkfire shivers that continued on well after she had padded far away from the leader's den.

"So, what do you plan to do?" Darkfire had her ear pressed against the wall of the leader's den. She made to look casual, so to not call suspicion to herself, as if she was simply waiting for her sister to come out so she could talk to Brightgleam. Really, Darkfire was snooping. She felt a twinge of shame; She really shouldn't be spying on her leader. But she continued to listen.

"Well," came the voice of Echostar, and there was a shuffle as if the she-cat had risen to her paws. "I suggest an attack. A light one. Just to show them that they can't get away with constant trespassing." A brief silence followed.

"Are you sure?" came the wary voice of Pinesmolder. "Not only would it be dangerous, but I don't know if it would be particularly... right."

"You want to talk about right?" snapped Echostar's voice. "Right is not trespassing. Right is following the code. Don't talk to me about right." There was another silence. "I'm sorry," murmured Echostar. "I should've lost my temper. But my mind is made up. Brightgleam, go fetch StormClan for me. Tell them that we're leading an attack on RainClan at the first light. Tell them about the trespassing."

"Yes, mamn," came Brightgleam's smooth but cheerful voice. "I'll get on that right now." Darkfire realized that their meeting was about to end, and she quickly bounded down from the ledge just in time as the cats began to exit the leader's den.

Darkfire noticed as Brightgleam began to pad away and out of camp, her ginger tabby tail flicking out of sight. Darkfire stiffened. She had to stop this attack.

She had to stop Brightgleam.

She darted after her sister as Brightgleam vanished into the forest. She trailed Brightgleam until they were well away from camp. Just as Darkfire began to move forward to confront Brightgleam, the

tabby she-cat turned, narrowing her eyes.

"Well?" she said, and Darkfire froze. "You were spying on us so quietly, and then you follow me? Are you going to try to convince me to disobey my leader's orders?"

"How did you..." mumbled Darkfire, frozen in place. Brightgleam laughed. Darkfire shook herself. "You can't do this! You have to convince Echostar not to lead a battle! She'll listen to you!" Brightgleam ignored her, continuing to pad forward.

Darkfire trotted after her.

"Listen to me!" she hissed. "If you do this, cats can die! This is a terrible idea!" Still, Brightgleam ignored her. "Brightgleam!" Darkfire stopped Brightgleam by digging her claws into her shoulder.

In a flash, Brightgleam twisted away from Darkfire, darted down, and grabbed her leg in her teeth. Darkfire yelped, trying to pull away. Brightgleam unsheathed her claws and raked them down Darkfire's leg, tearing the flesh. Blood began to trickle down. Darkfang yowled with pain as Brightgleam clawed the area one more time before stepping back, her eyes cold. Darkfire curled her injured leg to her chest, blood dripping onto the ground and soaking into the ground in a pool of scarlet.

"Next time," Brightgleam said evenly. "You won't interfere." Darkfire stumbled back, breath shallow. Brightgleam stared directly into her sister's eyes, and Darkfire shuddered. The tabby she-cat's eyes were dark, cold, and hollow. There was no emotion in them. Just... nothing. "Do I make myself clear?"

Red-hot fury raced through Darkfire, but she turned away. If she died, and Brightgleam would certainly be willing to kill her, there would be nobody left that knew about Brightgleam's treachery. Nobody left to stop her.

Without a word, Darkfire stalked back to camp, limping and leaving an ominous trail of blood behind her as she went.

CHAPTER 13

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"Are you ready?" Darkfire glanced up distractedly, tail flicking with nerves.

"Oh- Yeah," she said with a small frown, glancing at her paws. Leopardstrike pressed against her side, touching her nose to Darkfire's cheek.

"I'm serious, are you alright? You've been acting weird for a while." Darkfire shook herself, pulling away. Her amber eyes flickered.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Leopardstrike frowned slightly but nodded.

"StormClan just arrived," she said off-handedly. Darkfire felt sick.

"Already?" Leopardstrike nodded, stretching her forepaws out in front of her.

"Echostar wants to lead the attack at night. The StormClan cats should be resting up." Darkfire gave a brief nod. In the sky, the sun was just beginning to dip below the trees, casting purple shadows across the woods. Darkfire took a deep breath through her nose, flattening her ears.

"Yeah, okay," she said.

"Are you sure you're fine?" said Leopardstrike. "I know battles can be really tough. I'm nervous too," the light brown she-cat admitted. Darkfire stared at her paws.

"It just feels so wrong."

Leopardstrike twined her tail with Darkfire's. "You know it's for the best, don't you?"

"Of course I do," sighed Darkfire. "You're right." She rose to her paws, lifting her head with a sigh.

"Where are you going?" Leopardstrike called after her. She glanced back with a small frown.

"To meet the StormClan cats. I think that Crowpaw should be there. I want to see if he's gotten his warrior name yet."

"You and Crowpaw," smirked Leopardstrike. "Don't forget the code, m'kay?" Darkfire felt her cheeks heat up.

"It's not like that and you know it," she snapped, glaring at Leopardstrike, who gave her a coy smile in response. Darkfire rolled her eyes and padded off, amber-flecked pelt puffed up with embarrassment.

The StormClan cats were resting near the base of the volcano. Darkfire spotted a few of the warriors, as well as Crowpaw and another cat who she assumed to be the medicine cat. Their leader, Opalstar, wasn't there, but a light golden she-cat who carried an air of authority seemed to have been put in charge. Darkfire assumed the deputy.

"Crowpaw!" she greeted the dark brown tom, padding up to him. He glanced up, round eyes flickering in recognition.

"Oh! Darkpaw! Nice to see you!"

"It's Darkfire now," said Darkfire, and she couldn't suppress a grin at the smile that spread across Crowpaw's face. "You haven't had your ceremony yet?" Crowpaw shrugged.

"Not yet. I probably won't for another moon." He gestured for Darkfire to sit with him, and she grinned and obliged. "Windpaw did, though. So did my other siblings, Starlingpaw and Floodpaw."

"I don't think I've all of them," said Darkfire thoughtfully. Crowpaw shrugged.

"Makes sense. Starlingpaw and Floodpaw didn't come to the gathering."

"What did Windpaw get as her warrior name?" Darkfire settled down, paws tucked beneath her chest. Though the conversation was light, there was an air of darkness that still lingered at the edges of camp as the sun set lower, and the shadows grew longer and less prominent. Somewhere far away, an owl trilled as it shot between trees like a silent arrow.

"She's... called Windclaw, now," said Crowpaw. He sounded cheerful, but his voice was taut. "Floodpaw's called Floodspring, and Starlingpaw is Starlingsong."

"Those are... neat names."

"Yeah..." They sat in silence for a moment, neither meeting the other's gaze.

"Do you think-" Darkfire started at last, but she was interrupted by Echostar's call from the entrance of camp.

"It's time for the attack!" she yowled, lifting her chin. "StormClan cats, come with me. From my own Clan, I want Brightgleam, Pinesmolder, Patterfoot, Scarletblaze, Quailstep, Spottedfire, Sootysnow, Leopardstrike, and Darkfire!" Darkfire rose to her paws, glancing at Crowpaw.

"Do you want to walk together?" she said cautiously, and to her relief, Crowpaw nodded with a small smile.

"Sure," he said lightly, padding after the rest of his Clanmates. Darkfire hadn't noticed earlier, but Windclaw was among them.

The sun had sunk beyond the sky, casting darkness across the forests. The trees rose from the shadows like ghosts, their sparse leaves rattling. The night air was frigid, a chill sweeping through the cats like an icy claw. Winter was on its way. Darkfire subconsciously pressed close to Crowpaw, his soft pelt radiating warmth. He didn't argue, but once Darkfire realized what she was doing, she hurriedly pulled away, the tips of her ears growing hot.

The Clans marched forward in silence, their eyes glowing through the looming darkness. Their pawsteps were light, and their tails

swished through the air like ghosts. Not a word was said as they crept forward.

Darkfire felt a pelt brush her side as Leopardstrike pulled up beside her. The two she-cats met eyes, and Leopardstrike gave a tiny, imperceptible nod as she lightly brushed her tail across Darkfire's shoulders.

Darkfire took a deep breath in, her chest tight. She released it, trying to keep the tremble out of her shallow exhale. Her claws sheathed and unsheathed as she slipped forward, between the trunks of trees and around dense thickets of thorns and brambles.

Eventually, the vegetation grew noticeably thicker. Large leaves and twisted trunks pressed against Darkfire on all sides. The patrol slipped into more of a single file line.

The Great River looked just as it had the night of the Gathering. Smooth and dark, it flowed in a twisting current forward with a slight sloshing noise. Moonlight shimmered off its flowing surface. Echostar paused, the golden she-cat from StormClan pushing beside her. They glanced at each other, and Echostar dipped her head, bunching her muscles and leaping across. The StormClan she-cat followed, and trailing after was the rest of the Clan.

Darkfire's paws thumped lightly on the earth as she landed, and she glanced around, amber eyes glowing with anxiety. Her tail flicked from side to side, and her whiskers quivered. She turned back to the Clan. Crowpaw and Leopardstrike had paused to wait for her. She gave them a brief nod before forcing herself forward, wrenching her gaze away from the river. She pressed up alongside them.

With every pawstep she took, the darkness seemed to grow more suffocating. The vegetation was now so thick that it was near impossible to move without rustling the large leaves or tall grasses. The ground was marshy and wet, and Darkfire found herself having to wrench her paws out of thick mud more often than not. Her breath was shallow with effort. How had Echostar even considered this as a good idea?

However, in a moment that was all too short, they had arrived at

their camp. Darkfire froze, stunned by the sight.

A massive cliffside like that of StormClan's territory loomed in the darkness. A massive waterfall tumbled down the edge, crashing against the sharp stones at the bottom. It flowed into a massive lake, smoothing out as it tumbled down the path that led to the Great River. Two massive trees twisted upwards on either side of the cliffside, overgrown with overhanging moss and fungi.

"Be careful," growled Echostar in a low voice, but in the silence, there was no uncertainty that every cat in the patrol could hear her. "The rock is slick. It is very easy to fall down." Every cat nodded, their faces grim. Darkfire took another steadying breath as the cats moved forward into the moonlight, pelts dappled with silver.

They slipped forward and began their careful ascent up the cliffside. Darkfire felt her chest shuddering as she glanced down at the narrow drop. She would die if she slipped.

The cats moved in a cautious single file, Darkfire near the back of the line. Their footsteps were silent, their breaths hollow and light. Darkfire felt her legs trembling but her paws held firm, their grip strong on the stone.

Finally, she reached a wide ledge that had space for all the cats. She slipped to the side as the last few members of the line pushed forward, ears pricked.

A short, wide pathway lead to an ominous dark crevice behind the waterfall. Echostar rose her chin, flicking her tail to lead her patrol forward. Darkfire glanced over at Leopardstrike beside her for guidance. Leopardstrike glanced back, greenish-gold eyes flickering with uncertainty. She tore her gaze away from Darkfire before padding silently after Echostar, leaving Darkfire to follow, steps heavy with uncertainty.

At the mouth of the cave, Echostar paused. She narrowed her golden eyes. The cats' silhouettes were near invisible, but their eyes glowed ominously in the shadows.

A small warrior padded out of their den with perfect timing. They

looked young. Their fur was long and soft, with bluish tones that undermined a cool gray. Their face was ghostly white. Their amber eyes widened with terror upon seeing the narrow gazes of the EmberClan and StormClan cats. Echostar nodded to her patrol, and they rushed forward.

"EMBERCLAN!" shrieked the warrior. "EMBERCLAN IS ATTACKI-" They were cut off as one of the StormClan cats barreled into them, pinning them to the ground. Eyes appeared from the dens. Darkfire felt her pelt prickle. For a moment, there was a silence.

Then, the cave was alive with battle.

Darkfire raced forward into the fray, ears flattened against her dark-furred head. She found herself face-to-face with another young warrior, a russet-colored tom with fierce orange eyes. He snarled.

"Invader!" he hissed, aiming a heavy blow at Darkfire's head. She was just able to clumsily duck out of the way, stumbling on her paws. Her eyes widened as he barreled into her, throwing her back into the cave wall. He slammed his paws into the back of her head, shoving her face into stone as she let out a pained yowl. She twisted around, lunging forward to bury her fangs in his throat. Blood filled her mouth, and she released him, shoving him away from her. Dark scarlet blood dripped from her mouth, spattering across the stone. He gasped for air but leaped at Darkfire again. She dodged to the left, but he swerved, intercepting her. He ducked under her, thrusting her upwards and she slammed into sharp stone with a sickening *thud*. Blood trickled from somewhere behind her ear, but he wasn't done yet. He lashed out with a claw, catching her on her lower jaw with a *crack*. Darkfire stumbled to the side with a screech.

She shot forward, barreling over him with her legs tucked to her chest. He whirled with a hiss of surprise, but her legs were already running when she hit the ground.

"Coward!" he snarled after her, but she didn't care. She had to get out of here.

Darkfire skidded to a stop near the edge of the cave, sheltering in

the shadows as she tried to regain her breath. The world spun and dipped before her eyes, and she shook her head, swallowing nausea.

"Hiding, are we?" growled a voice, before something slammed into her from behind.

She stumbled forward, chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She stumbled on her paws, whirling around to face a golden she-cat spotted with brown. Her green eyes gleamed with ferocity, and she shot forward, digging her teeth into Darkfire's throat.

Blood dripped down the tortoiseshell's chest, and she choked, gasping for breath. She swatted weakly at the she-cat, swaying on her paws, but her blows were thin and poorly aimed. The she-cat held a death grip on Darkfire's throat. She felt her vision start to dim, shadows creeping in around her eyes.

She thudded to the ground, head cracking against the stone. Through half-closed eyelids, she could see the she-cat narrow her eyes and step back before vanishing in the rest of the battle. Blood, warm and sticky, matted her fur. She couldn't move, she couldn't breathe.

"Darkfire! Oh, StarClan!" She heard the voice distantly like it was echoing from some far-away cavernous chamber. She felt teeth sink into her fur once more, but this time, it was gentle. Gentle, but strong. She was dragged across the cave by something, her hind paws scraping against the stone.

She was gently laid to rest. Had the sounds of battle grown fainter?

"Hold on," said a voice, and a set of greenish eyes swayed in Darkfire's vision. Her eyelids flickered. "Please." Her vision dipped once more, and finally, her eyes closed.

Everything hurt. From the tips of her ears to her tail, and to the aching pain that stabbed into her throat and behind her ear. Her head pounded, but Darkfire forced her eyes open, squinting in the dim sunlight.

A beam of sun stretched in through a narrow opening in the

chamber, flooding the stone. It gleamed off the herbs that dangled from the stone.

"You're awake!"

The voice came from behind Darkfire, but she could only manage a grunt. A nose pressed against her cheek and there was a fierce licking on her pelt. Darkfire forced her eyes open wider and found that Leopardstrike was curled around her. Her fur around her wounds was clean and bandaged. Leopardstrike touched noses with Darkfire.

"Are you okay?" she exclaimed, eyes glimmering with worry. "I thought you'd died!"

"I'm fine," Darkfire managed to mumble. She blinked a few more times, lifting her head and ignoring the throb that intensified as she did so. "What happened?"

A dark shadow passed across Leopardstrike's face.

"Echostar lost a life," she said, her voice grim. "And... so it turns out... it was her last." Darkfire's eyes widened in horror.

"So... has Coldflurry already been appointed leader?" Leopardstrike nodded, twining her tail with Darkfire's.

"She's Coldstar, now."

"Who's the deputy?" Darkfire demanded, fear coiled in her chest. Leopardstrike gave a small frown.

"I don't think you're going to like it," she said cautiously. "I'm still not sure if Coldstar made the right decision..."

"Who's the deputy," Darkfire repeated, voice low. Leopardstrike bit her lower lip.

"Brightgleam."

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 14

Darkfire didn't know where she was. The world surrounding her was bathed in inky blackness that pressed against her on all sides. She suppressed a shiver, pelt prickling uneasily. Her amber eyes glowed through the oppressing blackness.

She shook her head, and her world came into view. Shadowy trees curled around her, their leaves rattling in the wind ominously. There wasn't a sound besides the crunch of the crumbled earth beneath Darkfire's paws as she took a hesitant step forward.

A cool wind swept past her, blowing her fur forward. A blue light flickered where the wind blew. A sort of whispering noise aroused in the air, calling her forward.

She took another step, and the wind strengthened, pushing hard at her back. She flexed her claws nervously, flattening her ears to her head. The light was hard and cold. There was no warmth behind it.

But curiosity propelled her onward. She took another step, lowering her head to the ground. The wind, starting as a soft whispering, rose to a howl with every paw step she took. The light grew brighter between the trees. Fog coated the ground, flowing and twisting around the skeletal trees. Darkfire paused, but it was hard to stay still. The wind gave another mighty shove, and she almost lost her balance. She stumbled on her paws, digging her claws into the ground for stability.

She continued forward. She had no choice. The light grew brighter still until it was nearly blinding. She slit her eyes, turning her head and pushing against the brightness. She ducked, as if she could slip under the light, and forced herself forward. Had the wind changed

direction? It seemed to be pushing her back now. But the light had changed. It had grown warm. It drew her forward. The whispering was so loud now. Just a few steps and she would reach the light.

She dug her claws into the ground, pressing forward and flattening her ears to her head.

But then she slipped. Her claws were ripped from the earth, and she went flying. She soared through the air, her vision dipping and spinning as darkness raced past her. She couldn't move, couldn't even cry out.

She slammed against a tree, limbs splaying before crumpling to the ground. She groaned with pain, eyelids flickering. She unsheathed her claws, forcing herself off the ground with a wince.

She turned as a small crunch sounded behind her. Two eyes gleamed out of the darkness. They glowed with a haunting light. Whatever it was moved forward, a grin appearing on their face as they moved from the shadows. Darkfire barely had time to recognize the tabby ginger pelt before a shape leaped over the familiar face.

The ginger pelt of a fox bristled, towering far over Darkfire. She was locked in place as saliva dripped from the beast's jaws, dark eyes glowing viciously. It took a step forward, ever careful and silent. Then it lunged at Darkfire with a wild scream, and Darkfire felt jaws ripping into her throat as her vision dipped and everything spun out of focus.

Darkfire's head shot up, eyes wide and claws scraping at her nest. Her chest shuddered with terror, her ears flat to her head. Her fur was fluffed out with terror.

The Warriors' Den was dark, shadows edging from the corners to surround Darkfire. The shapes of warriors were curled in soft nests of feathers and ferns. Their breath was comforting and warm. But all Darkfire could hear were the whispers from her nightmare.

Leopardstrike, sleeping beside her, stirred slightly in her nest, closed eyes scrunching slightly. Her spotted pelt was bathed in

moonlight, and looking at her, Darkfire felt her breaths slow and even.

She curled her tail around herself, dropping her chin onto her paws. The dream was already slipping away, the darkness and the cold light fading into a blur. Darkfire sighed, low and heavy, ears drooping. She squinted out of the entrance to the den, where the sky was beginning to turn shades of pink and gray. Dawn was on its way.

Darkfire stood up, stretching her forepaws in front of her. She winced at the aches that still lingered from the battle that had raged two days ago. She couldn't shake the images from her mind. She could only pray she never had to go through something light that again.

Pushing her thoughts aside, she wearily shook her head, padding out of the den. As she moved forward, tail-tip flicking, she felt the strength flowing back through her body. She yawned as she slipped onto the ledge outside the den, sitting down and lifting her chin. The camp was silent and still. It was nice, in a way. There wasn't a soul about, excluding the early morning sparrows that called insistently from the trees. A cool wind ruffled the tortoiseshell she-cat's fur, and she rolled her shoulders with another yawn, straightening her back in a half-stretch.

She gazed down at the forest and the shadowy floor beneath the canopy. Despite herself, she felt a shiver prickle through her pelt. It always looked like that, she supposed, whether it was day or night. That was part of the reason, or so she guessed, that she so vastly preferred the open beach of clearing of camp. You never know what's hiding in the shadows.

What's hiding in the shadows... She stiffened. She still hadn't told Echostar about the fox that she had encountered back when Charredlog was having her kits. Her ear twitched uncomfortably.

Oh. That was right. Echostar was dead now.

Her gaze traveled casually towards the leaders' den, where she knew that Coldstar was asleep. She didn't know whether Coldstar

would appreciate being woken, but surely her leader would want to know about a rouge fox in the territory.

Her mind made up, she leaped down from the ledge, striding determinedly over to where the leader's den sat, near the top of the others. But before she could rest her paws on the first ledge, a cool voice sounded behind her.

"Whatcha doing, Darkfire?" Darkfire turned, muttering curses to herself, to see the one cat she had not wanted to see right now.

"Hello, Brightgleam," she growled, glaring at her sister. Brightgleam gave a small smile.

"Hello, sister. What are we going to tell the leader about?"

How did she know? Darkfire stiffened.

"How do you know that?' she snapped. Brightgleam laughed airily.

"I know lots of things. And I also know that you won't inform the leader about the fox you encountered that night." Darkfire hissed softly.

"And why is that? Are you going to stop me?"

Brightgleam smiled.

"Why, yes. Aren't you clever."

"Why?" snapped Darkfire. "What reasoning do you have to stop me? It's a fox, for StarClan's sake. Don't tell me you have a mystical power granted from StarClan to speak to our natural predators."

Brightgleam grinned. "I'm afraid my motives are beyond you. But I will say this. I will make my Clan strong again." She leveled her gaze with Darkfire. "And there is nothing you can do to stop me. Is that clear?"

"We were born in the same nest," Darkfire muttered without thinking. "We share a mother."

"But not a destiny, hm?" Brightgleam examined her claws. "Pity, really, about Graypaw, and Bearpaw. And that business with Echostar was just *frightful.* Stars, did she put up a fight." Darkfire stiffened.

"You-" She didn't have the words. Brightgleam tilted her head.

"Me?"

"You're- You are a monster." Brightgleam chuckled.

"Call me what you like," she said simply, turning her back on Darkfire. "But know this. If you try to get in my way? If you continue to be a thorn in my side? There will be consequences. And trust me, I know the ways to hurt you most." Brightgleam turned her head, just enough, for Darkfire to see the psychotic glint in her eye. Darkfire finally understood.

Brightgleam would do anything to get her way.

Even if it meant destroying her own Clan.

Darkfire pricked her ears at the familiar call behind her, turning her head to smile at Leopardstrike as she padded over to Darkfire.

"Hello, Leopardstrike," she hummed, and Leopardstrike grinned.

"You're up early today," she said, glancing at the sky. The sun had just begun to rise, and Brightgleam was gathering cats for the Dawn Patrol. Darkfire shrugged. Though she tried to be cheerful, the memory of the fox lose in their territory still made her fur prickle to think about. She gazed at Leopardstrike in silence for a moment. The she-cat had no idea about the danger that lurked in their home. Darkfire felt herself stiffen. Leopardstrike could be killed by that fox.

Is this what Brightgleam had wanted? She had to warn her.

"Hey, Leopardstrike," she said cautiously. Leopardstrike pricked her ears, tilting her head at her.

"Yeah?" she said, flicking her tail. Darkfire opened her mouth to say

something, but was interrupted by Brightgleam's call.

"Leopardstrike, I want you to lead a patrol with Scarletblaze and Duskglow!" she said loudly from across the clearing. Leopardstrike gave an apologetic smile to Darkfire before padding off, waving her tail in a polite goodbye. Darkfire felt herself deflate. She glanced up at Brightgleam. The ginger tabby's eyes were like ice. Darkfire felt shivers run through her pelt, and she quickly averted her gaze, flattening her ears.

Brightgleam had apparently decided not to assign her to any patrols, but instructed her, instead, to repair the Elder's den, which was falling apart. Darkfire had wanted to claw her sister for assigning her to apprentice duties, but she had managed to hold her claws and settle for an icy glare at Brightgleam.

There wasn't much to do while she worked, so she began to listen to the elders. They talked often, and their conversation was rather interesting.

"That battle sounded intense," remarked Starlingcall to his mate, and Whisperfoot huffed.

"You know what was intense? The Battle of the Stars." Darkfire could almost feel Starlingcall rolling his eyes.

"You weren't even there for that, Whisperfoot."

"Yes, well, my great Grandfather was."

"Great great."

"Whatever."

There was silence in the den for a moment. Then Whisperfoot started talking again.

"How do you feel about the new deputy?" she remarked casually, but her voice gave the air of itching for some kind of controversy.

Starlingcall was silent for a moment. "Well," he said at last. "I'm shocked that they would choose someone so... young... but I

suppose it was StarClan's will that Brightgleam leads our Clan someday, with that prophecy, and all."

"Bah! That 'prophecy'! A bunch of superstitious rat-dung, I say!"

"Whisperfoot!" said Starlingcall, sounding shocked. "I'll say! You're taking a risk with saying things with that, you know!" Whisperfoot snorted.

"What are they going to do? Exile me? These old bones couldn't handle even walking out of camp!" Starlingcall sighed.

"You're not that old," he mumbled, but Whisperfoot ignored him.

As interested as Darkfire was, her attention was drawn away from the elder's conversation as a patrol padded back into camp. Among them was Leopardstrike.

Dropping the moss she was holding, Darkfire trotted over, pricking her ears.

"Welcome back!" she purred, and Leopardstrike smiled.

"Thanks! You didn't go on a patrol?" Darkfire scowled.

"No," she muttered, tail lashing. "Brightgleam gave me apprentice duties."

"Oh," said Leopardstrike, blinking. "Do you think-" But her words were interrupted by Brightgleam once more.

"Darkfire!" The deputy twitched an ear back, eyes narrowing. "Get back to work." Darkfire took a deep breath, pelt bristling.

"Hey!" said Leopardstrike cheerfully, padding up to brush pelts with Darkfire. "I'll keep you company!" Darkfire gave a small smile and nodded.

The two cats returned to the elder's den. Darkfire pretended to engross herself with the patched wall of the den as she spoke.

"Leopardstrike, there's something I need to tell you," she meowed,

her voice low.

"What's up?" Leopardstrike said, also lowering her voice.

"There's a fox in our territory," she said, claws flexing lightly. She could almost feel the shock radiating off of Leopardstrike from behind her.

"There's a- What? Did you tell the leader?"

"I can't," said Darkfire. She met eyes with Leopardstrike. "And neither can you. You can't tell anyone about it." Leopardstrike frowned, eyes fogging with confusion.

"But- What?" Her eyes narrowed. "Darkfire?"

"I need you to trust me," said Darkfire, fighting the rising panic in her chest. "Please." There was a brief moment of silence. Finally, Leopardstrike nodded slowly.

"Okay," she said, her voice taunt. "I trust you." Darkfire, finishing her work with the den, stepped back, pressing her nose to Leopardstrike's cheek.

"Thank you," she said, her voice strained with relief. Leopardstrike nodded wordlessly.

"Darkfire!" came Brightgleam's voice, and Darkfire dug her claws into the ground.

"If you're going to tell me to fix another den-" she blurted, but Brightgleam silenced her with a flick of her tail.

"No. I want you to go on a patrol with me and Spottedfire. I'll lead it." Darkfire frowned slightly. *What on Earth is Brightgleam playing at?* She felt her fur bristle slightly, but she took a deep breath to flatten it. She nodded silently.

"We can talk later," she said to Leopardgleam, dipping her head, before padding forward to join her mentor and sister at the front of camp. Spottedfire twined her tail with Darkfire's as she approached, and Darkfire smiled and twined hers back. Brightgleam's gaze

lingered on them for a moment, face expressionless before she flicked her tail and nodded.

"Right then. Let's go."

She padded forward, disappearing into the shadows. Spottedfire followed quickly behind, and Darkfire was left with no choice, but to slip after them, casting one last longing glance at her camp before her pelt was bathed in darkness, and her blood was cast into ice as she uneasily vanished into the forest.

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 15

Darkfire trailed after Brightgleam and Spottedfire, pelt prickling uneasily. Shadows that whispered and shifted surrounded her on all sides, broken by the flitting shape of a bird's silhouette. Its hollow calls made Darkfire pause and turn, amber eyes narrowing as her tail flicked uneasily.

Spottedfire paused in front of her, glancing at her former apprentice.

"Coming?" she asked lightly, pricking her ears. Darkfire shook her head with mild annoyance.

"Yeah," she muttered, glancing back towards Spottedfire. "Yeah, I am." She padded up to brush alongside Spottedfire, and the older she-cat gave Darkfire a questioning look.

"What's wrong?" she murmured. Darkfire glanced at Brightgleam in front of them, and she knew her sister well enough to catch the light prick of the she-cat's ears.

"Nothing," growled Darkfire untruthfully, quickening her pace to pull away from Spottedfire. The ginger she-cat didn't chase her, but Darkfire felt her gaze on her back.

With each step they took, the shadows seemed to grow deeper, more menacing. The wind was cold and wispy. Darkfire's whiskers trembled with apprehension as she slipped through the darkness in silence.

At last, Spottedfire spoke.

"Is this a border patrol or a hunting patrol?" she said quietly, but her voice carried an air of tension that was unlike her.

"Border," replied Brightgleam cooly from in front of them. "We're heading up to the RainClan border."

Though Darkfire had no idea why, every instinct inside her screamed to *run*. But she couldn't run, not with openly inviting questions that there was no way she could safely answer.

Not with Brightgleam watching her every move like a hawk.

Speaking of which, Brightgleam must have noticed her conversation with Leopardstrike. She knew that she must have. For some reason that Darkfire couldn't quite place, Brightgleam seemed to know what she was doing. Even when they were nowhere near each other.

Concerning was putting it lightly. But Brightgleam hadn't invited Leopardstrike on this patrol. Would something happen at camp while Darkfire was gone?

Darkfire's gaze drifted to Spottedfire. But if this all was a distraction, then why invite Spottedfire?

Unless...

Darkfire's ears flattened. What if Brightgleam was to kill Spottedfire? But why? It didn't make sense.

Darkfire's paws twitched as she came to an abrupt halt. She took a step back, pelt prickling.

"What's wrong, Darkfire?" came the voice of her sister. Darkfire met Brightgleam's hollow eyes.

"How much further do we have to go?" she asked in a shaking voice.

"Not far," Brightgleam said softly. "Not far at all."

Darkgleam's paws refused to obey her. A growing sense of urgency seemed to mount inside her chest.

"Something's wrong," she muttered hoarsely. Brightgleam tilted her

head, eyes glowing.

"What's wrong?" she asked. There was a note of challenge in her tone. A challenge for Darkfire, and Darkfire alone. But it wasn't the time to accept that challenge.

"Nothing," she said at last, but she couldn't keep her eyes from drifting to Spottedfire.

Maybe Brightgleam would kill her. Maybe Brightgleam would do nothing. Perhaps this was some elaborate plot to try to out Darkfire as a conspiracist.

Darkfire shook her head, forcing her paws forward. She would think herself into madness at this rate. She took steady breaths as she fell in step behind the rest of the patrol.

A long, deep breath in. Exhale slowly, calmly. Inhale again, careful to keep the steady rhythm.

Darkfire felt her fur lay flat as she breathed. She willed her mind away from thoughts of Brightgleam, or her sister's potential evil plots. She wouldn't let herself go crazy with such things.

At last, Brightgleam came to a stop, and glanced back at Spottedfire and Darkfire, waiting for the two to catch up.

As soon as Darkfire reached where Brightgleam was standing, she knew something was wrong.

She wrinkled her nose. A rancid stench was coming from somewhere. A stench that she knew, somehow. Not well, but one that she had encountered at least once before.

Spottedfire, apparently, smelled it too. She turned to Brightgleam, eyes narrowed.

"Brightgleam? Why do I smell fox?" Brightgleam stiffened. Maybe just a little bit.

"Fox?" the deputy repeated, tilting her head slightly. Darkfire froze. Her blood turned into shards of ice.

"Yes," Spottedfire said, tail flicking. "Fox."

Brightgleam took a step forward, raising her head to sniff the air. The ginger tabby narrowed her eyes.

"I smell it," she hissed, flicking her tail. She pointed her nose. "This way."

Darkfire didn't want to follow as Spottedfire and Brightgleam began to slowly make their way forward. But she had to. If Brightgleam tried something, she had to be there to stop it.

They stopped at a small opening beneath a rock. The stench was so strong that it made Darkfire want to bury her muzzle in the dirt, just so she didn't have to smell it anymore.

Spottedfire leaned down, eyes narrowing.

"We should be careful. The fox is definitely in th-" Her voice was cut off with a yelp of pain as Brightgleam dug her claws into Spottedfire's spine, pressing herself down onto the she-cat. Darkfire's eyes widened, and she snarled with horror as she lunged at Brightgleam.

"Get off of her!" she yowled, but before she could even touch Brightgleam, she had been kicked aside so forcefully that she flew several feet away. She slammed into the rough bark of a tree and slid down, crumpling onto the earth.

Her vision blurred slightly, and her shoulder felt like it had been dislocated at the very least. Broken, at the worst. Beneath Brightgleam's claws, Spottedfire writhed and snarled, but Brightgleam didn't even waver.

"Traitor!" Spotttedfire gasped as Brightgleam locked her claws around Spottedfire's throat.

Brightgleam's gaze slowly turned to Darkfire, and a soft smile spread across her face.

"I warned you," she hissed, before thrusting Spottedfire into the fox's den.

Screams rose from the darkness. Screams of a cat. And the horrible snarling of a fox.

The sound of ripping flesh sounded from inside the cave, and a flick of blood spattered against the entrance, gleaming and scarlet against the bare earth. Darkfire screamed, tears beginning to roll down her face.

"Spottedfire!" she shrieked, stumbling to her paws, ignoring the burning agony in her shoulder. "SPOTTEDFIRE!"

She stumbled to the edge of the fox's den, but Brightgleam shoved her back.

"She's already gone, Darkfire," she said, a grin spreading across her face. "She's dead." The den had gone silent. A deathly, complete silence. Brightgleam turned back to the den, and slammed her claw upwards into the dirt. The entrance collapsed, leaving only a mound of earth.

Something inside of Darkfire snapped. With a horrible howl of rage and horror, she lunged at Brightgleam. Her sister easily sidestepped, gripping Darkfire's wrist in the process. She braced her paws on either side of Darkfire's paw and snapped it upward.

Darkfire was blinded by white-hot pain, and she screamed, stumbling to the ground. Her shoulder burned like fire, and pain raced up her foreleg every time she put slight pressure on her paw.

Brightgleam stalked up to her sister, and reared up, slashing her claws across Darkfire's face. Blood covered Darkfire's vision, and she nearly sobbed with the pain of it.

Then Brightgleam stepped back. She smiled at Darkfire, then unsheathed her claws. Darkfire squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the blow.

But it didn't come.

When Darkfire opened her eyes, she saw that Brightgleam's pelt was covered in her own blood. Confusion mixed with the agony in Darkfire's mind.

"How could you attack me?" Brightgleam said, tauntingly. "How could you kill your mentor?" Darkfire's mind was fuzzy and slow. It took her a moment to comprehend the meaning of her sister's words. Then she realized it. The horrible truth."You'll be exiled," said Brightgleam lightly. "What a shame."

Then the ginger she-cat turned and sped off into the forest. Darkfire's eyes widened with terror. She couldn't let this happen.

She dragged herself to her paws, stumbling forward. Every step hurt. Her vision was blurred. She was nearly blinded by the blood that dripped from the scratch on her face.

She focused on the steps. Just one step. Then another.

She collapsed, sometimes. Once, she didn't have the energy to get up. She just lay there as the shadows lengthened and the light turned golden. Crows with feathers dark as the night sky began to flit down, hopping around Darkfire's limp body.

She thought about Leopardstrike. She needed to protect her friend. Just the thought was enough to force her back to her paws and force her body back into motion.

Darkfire had no idea what she was expecting as she stumbled into camp. She was hardly aware of her surroundings as she made it past the entrance before collapsing onto the ground. Her breath came short and fast, and her eyelids flickered.

She was finally home. She was safe. Not even Brightgleam could hurt her here. She let out a breath. Through blurred vision, she saw other cats turn their heads. She had no idea who they were. Pairs of eyes burned into her pelt.

Her eyes closed.

As Darkfire passed into the waking world, she couldn't muster the energy to open her eyes. She couldn't move. Every inch of her ached. She couldn't remember what had happened last.

She wasn't in any den that was familiar to her. Nothing but dirt pressed against her side as she remained limp where she lay.

She considered attempting to open her eyes, but a faint conversation reached her ears.

"What do we do with her?" asked a voice. A familiar voice that made Darkfire's chest tighten. Leopardstrike.

"Whatever Coldstar deems necessary," responded another voice. Pinesmolder.

"I can't believe she'd do something like that," rasped Leopardstrike, her voice low. "I..." Darkfire couldn't take it anymore. Her amber eyes flew open. Her breath was quick.

Leopardstrike turned, eyes widening.

"Dar-" she started to say, glee in her voice, but then she stopped. Her eyes hardened, and she glared at Darkfire. Her stare was accusing and hard, and it made something in Darkfire freeze.

"Leopardstike," Darkfire choked, flattening her ears, but Leopardstrike turned away.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she hissed, her voice cold. Darkfire's heart shuddered, and she felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes.

"Leoaprdstrike," she called, hardly able to keep the plea out of her voice, "whatever she told you, it's a lie!" Leopardstrike snarled, finally turning to face Darkfire. Her greenish gold eyes were blazing with hate so fierce that it made Darkfire shrink back.

"Stop trying to deflect the blame!" she yowled. "You are a disgusting traitor! You killed Spottedfire! You tried to kill Brightgleam! And you killed my brother." Her voice cracked at the forced words. "I should kill you right now," snarled Leopardstrike, bristling. Darkfire couldn't move. Then tears started rolling down her face.

"Leopardstrike," she sobbed. "Leoaprdstrike, please!" The light brown she-cat turned away.

"I refuse to associate with a murder," her friend rasped. Darkfire's tears thickened. Her gaze blurred, and she finally began to cry.

She buried her face in her paws, hot tears burning her face. Her chest shuddered as she sobbed, and a wall that she had built so fiercely inside her finally cracked before crumbling to the ground.

The sobs came faster and harder, and she couldn't hold the tears back. She had lost everything. The dirt beneath her paws became damp. She couldn't hear anything. Nothing mattered anymore.

She was alone.

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 16

Darkfire awoke to a fierce paw prodding her in the side. Her tail-tip twitching in mild annoyance, she opened her amber eyes.

"What?" she grumbled, squinting through the sunlight and shifting uncomfortably against the bare ground.

Leopardstrike held her chin high, not meeting Darkfire's gaze.

"Our leader wants you in the main camp." Darkfire narrowed her eyes, pelt prickling.

She had been a prisoner in her own home for around two days now. Confined to where she sat on the outskirts of the camp, she was closely guarded by the warriors and cats she once called friends. They never met her eyes. Darkfire could see the uncertain prickle of their pelts when they were around her.

Her stomach gave a fierce rumble. She hadn't been allowed thus far to hunt for herself, and no prey had been brought to her. Likely on Brightgleam's orders, Darkfire assumed, but she couldn't be sure. It could have been anyone making the decision to deprive her of food.

Darkfire growled softly, turning away from Leopardstrike. She rested her head on her paws, glaring bitterly at the dying greenery that provided little shelter. She heard a shuffle behind her.

"What are you waiting for?" snapped Lepoardstrike's voice. "Get a move on."

Darkfire ignored her, curling her claws into the ground and resting her chin on her paws. She closed her eyes.

She jolted upright as a sharp pain flashed across her side. She stumbled to her paws, snarling at Leopardstrike. Every step was a stabbing pain Leopardstrike shoved her forward into the main

clearing, and she bit down on her tongue to keep from crying out. She let Leoppardstrike shove her, nothing but hostility inside her left for her only friend. A powerful bitterness that made her claws slide in and out against the ground, one that made her teeth itch to sink themselves into Leopardstrike's throat.

She shook her head, quelling the violent thoughts. She lifted her chin as she hobbled forward. She refused to become just as bad as Leopardstrike. She refused to show any weakness or anger. She refused to let this crush her.

It was the spite that led her to be able to hold herself up as she came to a stop in front of the Fireledge.

She felt the burning gazes of the surrounding Clan cats' eyes trained on her. Her ears twitched at the soft growls that rose into the air.

"May all cats old enough to follow the right path gather for a Clan meeting!" Darkfire rose her gaze at the high-pitched voice of Coldstar. The leader looked so small compared to the towering figure of Echostar, who had been the only one to ever be silhouetted there since Darkfire could remember. Coldstar lifted her chin, narrowing her green eyes. They glowed in the dim amber light that was cast from the setting sun behind her. The volcano overshadowed Darkfire, bathing her pelt in purple shadows.

Brightgleam was perched on a smaller ledge next to the Fireledge. Her fur flowed gently in the wind, and her face betrayed nothing. Darkfire forced her pelt to smooth at the sight of her.

"We have gathered here today to decide the fate of our former Clanmate, Darkfire," Coldstar said, her voice having a heavy undertone. "Accused of the murder of Spottedfire, Bearpaw, and the attempted murder of our deputy Brightgleam, Darkfire now stands before us as a traitor. Brightgleam, as the witness, what have you to say on the matter?"

Brightgleam rose to her paws, lifting her head. Her gaze clouded with deep sorrow.

"I had invited Darkfire on a patrol," the deputy said, seeming to

gaze off into the distance. Darkfire was all too aware of the EmberClan cats pressing in on all sides of her. "I chose Spottedfire by chance. I thought it would be a bonding experience for the both of us since we had seemed to be at odds lately." Brightgleam paused, gazing around at the other cats and taking a deep breath.

"We headed down to the RainClan border. Darkfire was acting a bit odd as we went down, but I tried to think the best. I attempted to speak to her, but she ignored me.

"Spottedfire caught the scent of a fox. The three of us tracked down the scent until we came to what its den was supposed to be. That's when Darkfire struck. She dashed over and shoved Spottedfire in the den. I watched her get ripped apart. Then Darkfire turned to me and said 'I can't have any witnesses. I killed Bearpaw because he learned the truth. Now I'll kill you.' She leaped at me and attacked me, but I managed to kick her off and run away. I ran and ran until I came back here."

Silence followed Brightgleam's words. Darkfire's pelt bristled.

"That's not true!" she yowled, and the attention of every cat turned to her. Her gaze flitted towards Leopardstrike, whose face was a thinly masked mix of confusion and horror. Darkfire lashed her tail and turned her gaze up to Coldstar. "She was the one who killed Spottedfire! And Bearpaw! And Graypaw! And Echostar! She killed them all!" Gasps went up around the Clan as Darkfire took a stumbling step forward. "She's a murderer and a traitor! She'd been threatening and blackmailing me this whole time! She told me that if I ever told anyone, she'd kill Leopardstrike." Darkfire's voice cracked, and she couldn't help stealing another glance at Leopardstrike. Her legs trembled, but she forced herself to stay upright. "She'll manipulate every last one of you until she has complete control over this Clan!"

"Darkfire," hissed Coldstar. "Stand down." Darkfire took rapid breaths as she took a reluctant step back, glaring in the direction of Brightgleam. Coldstar tilted her gaze upwards at the sky, mouth moving in silent prayer. After a brief pause, she turned back to her silent Clan.

"We will hold a vote," she said at last. "There will be three sections." She gestured with a paw to Brightgleam, and the she-cat leaped down from the rock to stand before the Clan.

"We will vote, as is standard, with the stones provided to us by this volcano, which was, in turn, gifted to our Clan by our Warrior Ancestors. " Brightgleam nodded at the volcano. Her eyes were solemn, but Darkfire thought she could see the tiniest sparkle of glee in them. "If you believe we should let Darkfire remain among us, your stone will be placed here." Brightgleam padded over to a small patch of lilacs. She then turned and padded directly under the Fireledge. "If you believe she should be exiled, cast your vote here. And if you believe she should be executed..." Brightgleam gestured to the place where Darkfire had been held for the last two days. "Then your vote will go here."

Darkfire's mouth became suddenly dry. Shards of ice stabbed at her, and she swayed on her paws. *Executed.* She could be executed.

Coldstar nodded to Brightgleam before turning back to the Clan. "Begin the vote," she said, her voice clear and loud. Cats began shuffling forward to select their pebbles from the volcano. Darkfire collapsed to the ground, her burning shoulder finally wearing out. She cast her gaze to her paws, flattening her ears. She didn't particularly want to see who voted for her death.

The time ticked painfully by. The harsh call of a crow made Darkfire startled, glancing up instinctively. The large black bird was directly in front of Darkfire, head tilted to stare at her with a bright, beady eye. She didn't have the motivation to swipe at it, so Darkfire just stared at it forlornly.

Seemingly startled by the cat's movement, the crow hopped back, ruffling its wings before shooting into the sky.

Darkfire took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Cats of EmberClan, your voices have been heard, and the vote has been completed," called Coldstar at last, and Darkfire stumbled to her paws, chest shuddering.

There was only a single stone amidst the lilacs.

Darkfire took a shaky breath, turning her head to gaze at the other two piles. They looked nearly even.

"The stones have been counted, and Darkfire's fate has been determined." Darkfire's pulse quickened, her heart slamming against her chest. Her claws dug into the earth. "Darkfire will be..." Coldstar paused, her eyes flickering. Darkfire shook uncontrollably, terror racing through her blood.

"Executed."

Darkfire froze. The world rushed past her. The world swayed beneath her paws.

Executed. Executed. Executed. The word beat through her mind as the world grew dark and fuzzy around the edges. She let out a loose sob, stumbling and shaking on her paws.

"I'm sorry," said Coldstar, her voice faraway and distant to Darkfire's ears. "But there can be no traitors among our Clan." She leaped down from the Fireledge and took a step towards Darkfire. This was it, she was going to die.

She would not die.

As Coldstar lunged for Darkfire, she ducked underneath her and shot like a bullet. Her shoulder and paw screamed with pain, but she wouldn't stop, not for anything.

Shocked and angry cries rose from behind her, but she had already slipped into the bushes. Slipping between the trees and paws pounding against the ground, Darkfire could hear nothing more than her own heartbeat and the blood roaring in her ears. If she was being pursued, she would have no idea. Still, she forced herself onwards, even as the pain grew so overwhelming that she thought that maybe death wouldn't be so horrible.

Her sprint eventually stumbled into a limp, then a trot. Darkfire soon found herself struggling along, her footsteps slow and injured. Finally, she couldn't run anymore, and she collapsed to the ground.

Her breath came short and fast, but she had the sense to force herself into a narrow crevice beneath a rock. Dragging her leg over the ground and pulling herself with her uninjured paw, she pulled herself beneath the rock, curling her tail around herself.

She dropped her head onto her paws, panting. She had no idea where she was. Maybe she had made it all the way to GustClan camp. Maybe she was only a few fox-lengths from camp.

Right now, Darkfire didn't care. Struggling to keep her eyes open, she shuffled back as far as she could go, tucking her tail under herself and carefully checking that she wasn't visible.

It was then, and only then, that she finally dropped her head onto her paws, and let herself sleep.

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 17

When Darkfire opened her eyes, it was to the sound of voices.

She dug her claws softly into the ground, tilting an ear back. Her shoulders ached from the small space and she still hadn't quite recovered from the injury she had gotten around four or five days back. Her golden eyes flashed as she flexed her wrist and winced. Yep. As expected.

Thin rays of golden sunlight traced faint lines through the mouth of her shelter and dappled her amber-splashed fur. The voices were growing louder now, and Darkfire shrunk back as much as she could, pelt bristling uneasily. She hadn't seen any cats for the couple of days that she had lingered by the cramped rock. She had managed to snag herself a mouse, but that was about it. Every noise, every crack of bracken, sent her scrambling back to slam herself again the edge of the stone, hiding in the comforting shadows. Every twitter of the forest robins made her start, and scare away any prey that she had managed to try to hunt.

It didn't help that she consistently missed her leaps as her shoulder gave out at precisely the wrong moments. Her stomach gave a rueful growl and cramped so terribly that Darkfire bit back a whimper.

She still wasn't quite sure where she was, but she assumed somewhere on the edge of StormClan territory. She had thought she was heading in the direction of RainClan, but it was very possible she got turned around in her frantic race to escape her once-home.

Darkfire narrowed her eyes as the footsteps came into hearing range, and the voices became loud enough for her to make out what they were saying.

"It's so unfair that I have to wait six moons just to become a

warrior," grumped what sounded like the voice of an apprentice. "I'm ready *now*!"

"You were apprenticed yesterday," came the dry voice of a she-cat. "There's no need for impatience." The apprentice huffed.

"I bet I could take down any warrior in the Clan!" the bragged. "I bet I could-" Their words were interrupted with a yelp and the sounds of a slight shuffle. Darkfire's ears pricked back as she leaned a bit closer to the entrance, but they were well out of her range of sight.

A moment of silence passed before the she-cat spoke again.

"I think you still have some learning to do."

"I wasn't ready," protested the apprentice, and Darkfire assumed that the she-cat had easily pinned the bragging tom. She muffled a snicker before her eyes widened. This was the first time she'd laughed in days.

The sound of footsteps became louder, and finally, the two cat's paws came into view. Darkfire shrunk back as silently as she could, terrified that either one would risk a peek beneath the boulder. Her golden eyes glowed from the darkness as she scanned the cats' paws for any clue of who they were. Amber shadows made it hard to tell, but the smaller set that most likely belonged to the apprentice was pitch-black, and the larger set, most likely the mentor's, was a dark shade of ginger.

"I smell a cat," whispered the apprentice, and his paws shuffled as he took a step after his mentor. The mentor snorted.

"Well, what do you expect?" Her paw raised as she gestured to herself and the apprentice.

"No, no, not that..." The apprentice took another scent. "It smells like another Clan!"

Darkfire's eyes widened with nervousness. Her tail-tip flicked against her side, and she dug her claws a bit harder into the dirt beneath her.

"Well, duh," said the mentor. "We're on the EmberClan border." Darkfire felt her bristling fur flatten, and a relieved shiver ran up her spine.

The apprentice sounded unconvinced as he said, "Well, can we check at least?"

The mentor sighed. "You can go ahead. I'll be marking our territory."

The sound of a shuffle was heard. Darkfire watched as the apprentice bounced around the small opening in the forest, paws skipping along the ground.

Then his glowing eyes appeared. They were a light shade of brown, flecked with a vibrant gold. They opened wide and round. Darkfire's own eyes did too, and horror streaked through her.

There was a tension-filled air of silence for a moment. Darkfire's blood had already become ice once more, and her stomach gave an especially annoyed growl.

Then the apprentice scrambled back. "Gingerstripe!" he howled, and Darkfire quickly pushed herself off the wall with her hind paws, trying to squeeze out of the crevice.

Her shoulder slammed against stone, and she couldn't hold in a yelp of pain. Her hind legs shoved and pushed, digging up dry dirt in showers behind her, and finally, she squeezed free. But she didn't have time to even tense to dart away as a strong paw shoved down on her back.

Darkfire went down easily- too easily. She raged and seethed at herself for being so weak, but the warrior standing over her was fit and strong.

It was a dark ginger she-cat, her pelt short but thick. Darker stripes lined her wide-set face, and her muzzle was broad. Her eyes were narrow and she squinted with a calculating azure gaze. A mishappened white spot rested over each eye.

Darkfire struggled feebly underneath her grip, but her shoulder

gave another shot of agony, and she went limp, breath labored and rough.

The she-cat glanced at her apprentice, a tom that's fur was as black as midnight. His frame was lithe and scrawny, and he had long, thin legs. His eyes were odd, flecked strangely. Darkfire growled softly under her breath.

"Get off me," she grumbled, hackles rising.

"No," the ginger she-cat said plainly. Her gaze turned to her apprentice as she spoke.

"Go fetch some warriors from camp, mkay? Tell them I found an intruder and I want to bring it back for questioning."

"I am not an 'it'," hissed Darkfire. Despite her fragile state and damaged pride, she would not take kindly to being disrespected. "I am a *she*."

The ginger she-cat ignored her.

The apprentice nodded quickly, dark tail flicking before he turned and dashed off.

The ginger she-cat and Darkfire were left alone in the clearing, tails flicking and eyes narrowed. The she-cat decided to break the silence.

"Where are you from?" she growled suspiciously. Darkfire scowled.

"Wouldn't you like to know," she muttered, tail-tip twitching with defiance. The she-cat's ginger ear flicked back and her blue eyes narrowed.

"You're from a Clan," she said, her voice growing more suspicious by a second. "EmberClan, from the smell of you. Why aren't you with your Clan?"

Darkfire fought the memories that raged to resurface, her pelt beginning to bristle.

"Because I don't want to be," she snapped in a lie, her voice taunt. The she-cat became silent, and Darkfire didn't fail to catch as her gaze flicked towards Darkfire, cold and calculating.

Moments later, the apprentice returned, leading two more warriors. One was a cream-ticked tabby tom with a stormy blue gaze. The other was another tom, pure white with long, flowing fur and dark, forest-green eyes.

"So this is the intruder?" said the white tom, tilting his head. "Doesn't look like much."

Rage seethed in Darkfire's stomach, and she growled.

"Looks can be deceiving," she hissed, tail lashing. Her temperament was terrible, even she could regconize it. But being outed from her home, half-starved, injured, and treated like some scrappy rogue didn't particularly bring a grin to her face.

The cream tom glanced at the other four cats standing above Darkfire.

"We should take her back," he said, his voice strong with authority. A senior warrior, maybe even the deputy. "No use in just standing around here. Gingerstripe, let her up."

Reluctantly, the amber she-cat stepped off Darkfire. She tried to stand, but her shoulder gave way again, and she cursed violently as her legs splayed and she collapsed to the ground. She watched as the four cats exchanged a glance.

Her pelt bristling with defiance and rage, she shoved herself to her paws, biting down on her tongue. She glanced between them to the inviting forest that lay beyond, to the twisting trees and enticing shadows. Her paws itched to run, but more likely than not her shoulder would give out again, or her sprained paw would flare with pain. Either way, she would be easily overtaken in her condition, even worse than it had been back at EmberClan.

She let the cats herd her forward, ears flattened to her head and gaze flicking angrily from cat to cat.

The amber tabby, Gingerstripe, watched her right back, blue eyes narrowed. The apprentice watched her too, though Darkfire noted that there was more curiosity and caution than hostility.

She turned her gaze away from the cats and focused on her paws. One step at a time. She forced herself onward, her breathing matching her steps.

"We can stop and rest, if you would like," the cream tom offered, glancing towards Darkfire and noticing the way she struggled and limped forward.

"I'm perfectly fine," the she-cat spat through gritted teeth. She didn't need pity. She had been through far too much.

Finally, they reached a wide cliffside. For a second, Darkfire's mind flashed back to the similar cliff that lead up to the RainClan camp when EmberClan had invaded it. Unwanted memories surged forward of dark shadows and hollow steps, of flashing claws and bristling fur. Scarlet blood dappled the slate gray of the cliff.

Darkfire shook her head, taking another deep breath. She had to stay strong. She pushed back the hot tears that stabbed at the corners of her eyes and moved forward heavily, claws unsheathing and scraping against the stone.

Sunlight beat down on her dark pelt, casting shadows beneath her feet and tracing gold along her silhouette. Her pelt prickled uneasily again, and she slit her eyes against the glare.

When the five cats eventually reached the very summit of the cliff, they attracted a lot of stares and whispering.

Burning pairs of eyes glared into Darkfire's pelt, and whenever she spotted a pair, she glared fiercely back.

Her pelt burned with annoyance and embarrassment as she limped forward through the camp. She didn't want anyone to see her like this. Especially not another Clan. She lifted her chin definitely, moving forward with as much confidence as she could muster. She was relieved, at the very least, that she hadn't yet lost her pride.

Finally, the white tom stopped her with his tail, and she took it as a sign that she was welcome to collapse onto the ground. The patrol had brought her to an estranged corner of the camp, right by the deep drop. She shuffled apprehensively away from the edge, where below deep ocean waters churned and sloshed against the cliffside.

She rested her chin on her paws and watched as the group of four spoke in hushed voices, giving her occasional prying glances. The cream tom eventually padded away from the group and sprang off the edge to where a smaller one lay below. It made Darkfire's chest give a nervous lurch to think about how terrifying it must be to make such leaps, only a misplaced pawstep away from plummeting far below, to where nothing waited but certain death.

"Darkfire?"

Darkfire glanced around so fast that her shoulder screamed with pain, and for a second white-hot agony blurred her vision.

When her eyesight cleared, she saw a concerned, dark brown tom crouching before her, his forest-green eyes round and worried. Her mind, sluggish with lack of food and proper rest, was slow to recognize him, but once she did, her lips parted slightly.

"Crowpaw?" she managed. Crowpaw took a step forward, his pelt prickling.

"What happened? Are you okay? Why are you here? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," snapped Darkfire, pelt bristling. Crowpaw shrank back, and Darkfire flattened her ears, fur burning with regret. "I'm sorry," she meowed, sighing heavily. "I'm just... really on edge."

"It's... okay," Crowpaw said hesitantly, moving towards her again. "What happened to your shoulder?"

"Long story," Darkfire grumbled. "I really don't want to talk about it right now." Crowpaw nodded, looking thoughtful.

"I get it," he said. "How about I get you a mouse or something? You look half-starved." Darkfire's mouth opened to stubbornly refuse the offer, but her stomach gave one of the greatest flares of pain yet,

and she hissed with a half-sob through gritted teeth. She turned her gaze back on Crowpaw, pelt flattening.

"Yeah," she said breathlessly. "That would be great."

Crowpaw nodded before dashing off to the fresh-kill pile. Darkfire watched him bound across the camp, coming to a stop at a large pile of prey. He selected a tawny brindled mouse and a glossy blackbird, balancing them precariously in his jaws as he padded back to Darkfire, dropping the food in front of her.

Darkfire didn't waste any time. In just a minute, both had been reduced to thin white bones, and Darkfire's stomach felt fuller than it had in days.

"Thanks," she said, and the gratitude in her voice was real. The corner of Crowpaw's mouth quirked up in a half-grin.

"No problem," he said, before glancing at the rest of his Clan. "I'd recommend getting some sleep. No doubt they'll want to interrogate you when they wake up. I'll see what I can do about getting you some proper medical treatment."

"Thanks," Darkfire mumbled, resting her chin on her paws. As her eyelids flickered and her vision turned dark, she heard Crowpaw's words that spiraled through her head as she entered the world of rest.

"Anytime."

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 18

Darkfire groaned and rolled over as sharp claws prodded her side. "Go'way," she muttered half-heartedly, burying her face in her paws. Her muscles were sore and fatigue clung to her pelt, and she wanted nothing more than to let her weariness win and fall back into the welcoming embrace of sleep. But the claws poked harder, and she finally squinted her eyes open.

The first she saw was wide, open air, and miles of dark, rippling ocean. She gave a start, and scrambled back away from the rocky outlook, fur bristling with terror. The cat- Cats?- standing behind her moved back quickly.

Darkfire's gaze darted around her surroundings until her mind rendered the rocky peak correctly, and the memories flooded back unwarranted.

Darkfire took a deep breath as she fought to keep tears from coming to her round golden eyes, and her tail swished lightly over the dry stones. She hunched her shoulders, inhaling and exhaling strongly once more before turning to the three cats that stood patiently behind her.

The first was Crowpaw, his dark pelt bathed in sunlight. He gave Darkfire a friendly smile, dark green eyes glowing.

Standing on either side of him was a cat that was unfamiliar to Darkfire. The first was a slim pale yellow she-cat with long legs and tufted, patchy fur. Her face was a ghostly, pale white and darker brown speckles lined beneath her eyes and on her flank. Her eyes were a vibrant dark gold.

The other was a pure white she-cat with long, silky fur and a soft, bottlebrush tail that sprayed out like a fountain. Her fur rippled peacefully, like a stream flowing smoothly over rocks. Her eyes are

dark brown, contrasting beautifully with her pelt.

"Good morning, Darkfire," Crowpaw said, but his voice sounded a little tense. "These are the other medicine cats and my mentors. Streamspeckle is the light golden one..." He nodded at the pale she-cat, who watched Darkfire back with a wary gaze, "...and the white she-cat is Featherclaw." Featherclaw inclined her head to Darkfire, no hostility in her cool gaze.

"Nice to meet you both," said Darkfire, pulling her tail closer to her a little uncomfortably. "What's up?"

Crowpaw fidgeted, tail-tip twitching nervously.

"Opalstar wants you in the meeting cave. Right now." Darkfire tensed, eyes glancing around the peak.

"Could you... show me the way?" she asked hesitantly, reluctant to ask for help as she was, but Crowpaw nodded.

"Sure," he meowed, tail curling in the air. "Follow me."

Darkfire rose to her paws, and Crowpaw inclined his head to the other two medicine cats before leading Darkfire to the ledge from which she had come.

"So," said Darkfire, trying to make conversation as they dipped into the dark, narrow tunnels that lead deeper into the cliffside. "Shouldn't you already be a full medicine cat by now?"

Crowpaw grinned with embarrassment. "Yeah, actually. I was having my ceremony, but it got postponed when you came."

Darkfire flattened her ears, her face heating up. "I'm- sorry," she stammered, fur burning with embarrassment, but Crowpaw waved her off with a nervous smile.

"No, it's fine," he said, but his voice was tense. They walked in silence for a moment longer, and Darkfire was continually forced to duck her head at the low ceiling.

Darkfire had just opened her mouth to say something when

Crowpaw interrupted her.

"Oh, here we are!"

They pushed their way from the tunnel into a massive cavern. Light streamed in from a dim gap slightly off to the right, pouring in thickly from the ceiling. The golden beam landed directly on a tall mound of stone that was right in the middle of the cavern. Darkfire took a moment to notice the small gems that sparkled and shimmered that were inlaid into the stone and the strange colored pawprints that seemed to walk around it. Opalstar was sitting atop the rock, the spotted ginger she-cat's fur glowing in the golden sunlight that traced her powerful figure. There were a few other cats in the clearing as well. A spotted pale golden she-cat splashed with white that Darkfire recognized from the gathering as the deputy was curled calmly at the base of the great rock, her tail flicking back and forth. Standing before them with her head tilted arrogantly was a dark, ginger-pelted she-cat that sent shivers running up and down Darkfire's spine like snakes, and made her claws clench into the stone so hard that they chipped.

"Greetings, Opalstar," said the light, slithering voice of Brightgleam.

Darkfire froze. Crowpaw nudged her forward, but she refused to budge, her golden eyes round and glittering with horror. He glanced at her, questioning in his gaze, and she met his eyes with only hollow fear.

"Hello, Brightgleam," Opalstar responded cooly, pricking an ear. Her odd-colored eyes, one blue, one gold, glittered with emotion that Darkfire couldn't recognize in her panic. "Why have you come?"

Brightgleam took a step closer, opening her mouth to speak, but the deputy hissed from beneath the rock.

"Not so close, deputy," she growled at Brightgleam, flicking her tail towards the multi-colored pawprints. "To walk over the Marks is to walk over our ancestors." Darkfire noticed that there was a small gap between the prints that lead to the clear, inner circle where the deputy was sitting. Brightgleam took a step back, ducking her head with an apology and smiling ruefully.

"I apologize profusely, Lightspot," she purred, addressing the she-cat by name. The deputy, Lightspot, narrowed her eyes at Brightgleam, her gaze glittering with distrust. Apparently, the she-cat was more perceptive than Darkfire had given her credit for. Brightgleam lifted her chin, and Darkfire tensed as the she-cat's gaze flicked to her before turning back to Opalstar. "As you may or may not know," said Brightgleam, curling her tail around her paws a respectful distance away from the prints. "Darkfire was sentenced to execution by EmberClan a few days ago. She managed to flee, and I have been traveling from Clan to Clan to search for her. She has wronged the Clans by taking the lives of multiple of our cats. Bearpaw, and apprentice, Spottedfire, her own mentor, and an attempt on the life of my very own. I am glad it seems you have found her."

Opalstar's eyes narrowed, and a low growl trickled from her throat.

"So I suppose you expect us to return her to you? So you can do as you please with a traitor from *your* Clan?"

"Well, she is an EmberClan cat, after all," Brightgleam smiled, eyes shining like those of a snake, so close to striking that Darkfire could feel her fangs sinking into her throat. Bolts of horror shot through her, and she couldn't bare to steal a glance at Crowpaw. She just pictured the horror and disgust that was twisted across his face right now. It made her sick.

"Well, Brightgleam," said Opalstar, rising to her paws and tilting her shoulders back. *This is the end*, Darkfire thought miserably. Her gaze slowly drifted back to the tunnel, but she was tired of running. Besides, even if she tried to flee, she would never make it. She was doomed.

But then Opalstar spoke. "I will say, it seems unfair to sentence this cat on the base of accusations." Darkfire and Brightgleam alike froze in place.

"Your leadership," said Brightgleam, trying for an amused smile but instead looking like she had swallowed crow-food, "I am a personal witness to her crimes!" She gave a hollow, empty laugh that reeked with frustration. "You must give her back to us, *now*!" Her voice rose, and for a second her face twisted into an ugly snarl before

settling back into a light smile.

Opalstar lifted her chin. "She has fled to our Clan. We are currently in possession of her. And while she is, you cannot touch her."

"Opalstar," said Brightgleam, composure rapidly declining. "I highly recommend you reconsider. This could damage the alliance that you have so long held with EmberClan, could it not? Just hand over the traitor, and we can all forget about this whole situation!"

"Watch your tongue," hissed Opalstar, fur bristling. "I don't much appreciate you barging into my Clan and telling me how I should run it. For the time being, Darkfire is under *our* protection."

"But-" started Brightgleam, a hiss in her voice, but Opalstar interrupted.

"No buts. Get out now, or I'll remove you personally."

Brightgleam's lips peeled back in a brief snarl before she spun around and stalked out of the camp. Darkfire took deep breaths, her heart still pounding wildly and her paws still trembling. She finally glanced at Crowpaw, and his face was such a wild range of emotions the she-cat couldn't possibly hope to decipher them.

Opalstar sprang down from the rock, padding carefully around the multicolor pawprints and coming to a stop before Darkfire. She towered over the young warrior, and Darkfire gazed up at her. Where she had expected to find fear or uncertainty within her, she felt only respect. Opalstar and Lightspot were the first cats beside herself she had seen stand up to Brightgleam, and it made her feel more pride in the StormClan leader than any other cat had ever drawn out from her.

Opalstar was the first to speak.

"I may have defended you," she said, her voice cool, but there was an underlying note of sympathy that made Darkfire's pelt prickle gratefully. "but you will still have to prove yourself to my Clan. For now, I will bring you to one of our guest caves where you will reside for now."

"Th-Thank you, Opalstar," Darkfire stammered, overwhelming gratitude rushing over. She mentally chided herself.

You're in the Clan of strength and courage, you mouse-brain! she thought, squinting with annoyance. *Stop being such a wimp!*

But Opalstar looked more amused than anything. She dipped her head to Darkfire and turned.

"Lightspot!" she called to her deputy. The pale gold she-cat pushed herself up onto her forepaws, lifting her chin and flicking her tail dutifully. "Come with me. We have matters to discuss."

Opalstar disappeared into a different tunnel, directly behind the gem-studded stone. Lightspot hesitated, her narrow gaze drifting to Darkfire.

"Don't cause trouble," she said in a cold voice before she too turned and followed where the tip of Opalstar's ginger tail had just vanished.

Darkfire and Crowpaw were left alone in silence, standing face to face in the now-empty chamber.

"I'm sorry," said Darkfire in a rush. "I should've told you, but Brightgleam's lying, I swear, please don't hate me, I've been through a lot-" She broke into a loose sob. She mentally scorned herself as she struggled to regain control of her emotions. She forced her face back into a neutral position, wiping the tears away from her eyes with a paw.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," said Crowpaw a bit nervously, touching the side of Darkfire's cheek with his nose.

She blinked gratefully at him, pulling away and flicking her tail.

"Let's go," she said simply, turning to duck back through the passage. She heard the sound of Crowpaw's footsteps padding after her as she slipped through the narrow darkness.

"Darkfire!" Darkfire perked her head up, stretching and yawning widely.

"I wasn't asleep," she said drowsily, tail-tip flicking. Her injured shoulder and wrist had been wrapped in an herb polituce by the medicine cats a few hours ago, and already they felt far better than they had recently.

Standing at the entrance of her cave was the scrawny apprentice from earlier, his pitch-black fur puffed up as if he was trying to look intimidating. Dangling from his mouth was a small brindled woodmouse, its tiny pink forepaws curled beneath its small chin.

He moved forward reluctantly, dropping the mouse instead of Darkfire. She dipped her head gratefully and bent down to take a bite.

The apprentice didn't move from his spot, watching Darkfire with wary eyes.

"I heard that you killed someone," he blurted, tail flicking into the air. "Is that true?"

Darkfire spat out the chunk of her mouse, claws extending from her soft pads as she hacked violently.

The apprentice backed up, apparently quite alarmed by her response to the question. Darkfire took a moment to choke up the piece of mouse that had gotten lodged in her throat.

"No," she said when her throat was clear. "I didn't kill anyone."

"Why does EmberClan want to kill *you*, then?" the apprentice asked, gold-flecked eyes round with curiosity. Darkfire groaned.

"Long story," she huffed, before rolling onto her back. The apprentice prodded her with a paw insistently.

"Aww, come on!"

"Don't you have something better to do?" Darkfire grumbled ill-temperedly. The apprentice huffed.

"Not really."

Darkfire finally rolled back onto her side, narrowing her eyes at the apprentice. She sighed.

"First, tell me your name," she said at last. The apprentice sat back, tail-tip curling with excitement.

"Nightpaw," he said. "Now tell me the story!"

"There's not much to tell," muttered Darkfire. "Brightgleam, EmberClan's deputy and my sister, decided that I was a threat to her for some reason. I kept 'acting up' and she killed my mentor, blamed me, and EmberClan believed her. The end."

She expected Nightpaw to turn away with disappointment and leave her be, but to her surprise, his ears tilted back sympathetically.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice a little bit sad. "I don't have any siblings, and I always assumed they'd be super close."

"Some of them are," mused Darkfire, her mind flicking back to Leopardstrike and her relationship with her lost siblings. But her mind lingered on the light brown she-cat for a moment too long, and a new wave of grief washed over Darkfire. She took a soft breath.

"Well, my mentor will probably be wondering where I am," said Nightpaw, dipping his head to Darkfire. "Can I come back sometime?"

Darkfire hesitated before a soft smile crept across her face.

"If you want," she said, and watched as Nightpaw ducked out of the cave. She rested her chin on her paws and gazed out the entrance to the den.

Maybe, just maybe, if she tried hard enough, she could make a life here. In StormClan, far away from Brightgleam's influence and the heartache of her old home. Maybe now that Brightgleam had what she wanted, she would finally let Darkfire be.

But something told her that it wouldn't be that easy.

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 19

Darkfire squinted. She couldn't quite discern her surroundings from the heavy fog that was draped over the shifting landscape. Wherever she looked directly, the world shifted and pulled away with her. She forced her eyes to open wider, ignoring the blaring pain, and a shadow came into view.

Darkfire stood beneath the towering volcano, its shadow cast over her pelt and the swaying ground beneath her. But standing upon it was not Echostar. Echostar lay below the volcano, scarlet staining her pelt. She was dead. Horror beat through Darkfire as the corpse slowly turned over, forced to stare at empty white eyes and a mouth that opened and shut autonomously without words. She stumbled back as the world grew dark and a moon emerged from behind the volcano, forcing its way into the darkened sky.

Suddenly, a claw wrapped around the volcano, massive and curved, digging into the stone of the volcano and causing cracks to spread in an ominous spiderweb across the surface. Amber and gold appeared from within the cracks, slowly trickling down the dark stone, glowing and pulsing. Another claw wrapped around the other side, and the cracks thickened. The earth trembled beneath Darkfire's claws and the tortoiseshell stumbled, her breath quickening.

In one swift motion, the claws twisted and the tip of the castle was ripped away from its base, revealing a massive, twisted face.

Brightgleam stared at Darkfire, eyes wide and gleaming with sadistic joy. The top of the volcano went sailing through the inky air, crashing with a massive thud somewhere beyond the horizon. Brightgleam stepped forward as the lava splashed around her feet and lifted her chin with a grin. Scarlet dripped from her pelt, whether blood or lava, it was impossible to tell.

"Executed," Brightgleam whispered, and Darkfire stumbled back. She found she could move, her claws sinking into the ground. She spun and began to run, straining against the force that pulled her back. But her steps were clumsy in slow. Claws dug into her pelt on both sides, and she fought to stay upright. Her breath came sour and short. Brightgleam's delighted laugh echoed in her ears, surrounding her and plunging her into inky darkness like the sky. Trees surrounded her, but they too whispered and leaned. Then faces appeared within them. Faces of Darkfire's friends, her Clanmates, even storage cats that she didn't recognize. All of them, everyone, was laughing and sneering at the struggling she-cat. Darkfire stumbled, her forelegs flying out in front of her and eyes widening. She turned her head, chest heaving with effort as she strained. Claws had reached up from the ground, dark and gleaming, to wrap around her leg. Darkfire yowled and screamed for help, but the trees just laughed and laughed and taunted and teased. Darkfire's heart thundered in her chest as she pulled and pulled, but the claws were like iron. She shook her head wildly with a sob as tears began to slide down her cheeks. The mountainous footsteps of Brightgleam were getting closer. There was nowhere to run.

Then the claws released. Darkfire stumbled back without a second thought. They dissolved into smoke, drifting away on the breeze with whispers and hisses as they curved and slid smoothly through the darkness. Darkfire ducked behind a tree, pulling her tail closer to her and crouching down. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed, prayed to StarClan and all of her ancestors that Brightgleam wouldn't see her. That she would be safe.

She risked a glance between the leaves of the bush that had somehow replaced the tree, and she turned her head away quickly at the sight of the dark ginger tabby pelt that bristled and flowed smoothly against the forest.

"Where are you, Darkkit?" said the voice of Brightgleam, and suddenly Darkfire was young again. "I just want to play."

Darkfire shook her head, tears pricking at the corner of her eyelids.

"Darkpaw?" said Graypaw, her voice hollow with terror. "Darkpaw?

Bearpaw and I miss you! Please come out!"

But it was impossible. Impossible because Graypaw and Bearpaw were dead. Then Graypaw's anxious voice dissolved into Brightgleam's cold laughter and a fresh wave of grief washed over Darkfire, so strong that she had to bite down on her tongue to keep from crying.

"Darkfire," hissed a voice right next to Darkfire. But it wasn't the cold, high voice of Brightgleam. It was low and rough, the edges frayed in an almost charming way. It rolled smoothly over Darkfire, nearly comforting. But it held nothing but hate.

Darkfire turned her gaze to her side, amber eyes wide and horrified, to see the shape of Leopardstrike. The she-cat's lips peeled back in a snarl as her hackles raised. "There you are."

Darkfire shook her head frantically, her mouth parting as she tried to speak, but no words would leave her lips.

Leopardstrike stepped back, dissolving into black smoke like the claws that had reached out of the ground had, and she was replaced with the towering figure of Brightgleam.

"I truly am sorry about this, Darkfire," she said, with a smile, and Darkfire felt that her every muscle had turned to stone. "But I'm not."

"Darkfire?" came a voice, and Darkfire scrambled to her paws, eyes wild and fur bristling as sprigs of moss sprang up around her scrambling paws.

"Who- What-" she started, backing up to the corner of the cave, but she wasn't met with the gleaming blue gaze of Brightgleam.

Nightpaw stood at the entrance of her den, head tipped slightly to the side and brown eyes round and curious. "What's wrong?" he said. "Are you okay?"

Darkfire took a few deep breaths, forcing her fur to lie flat and lifting her chin. She tapped on the ground nervously with one claw as the memories of the nightmare seared her gaze every time she

blinked. She absorbed herself in scanning the cave in which she had been in for the last few days.

The walls were smooth and curved, the floor worn down and indented with years upon years of pawprints. Darkfire's nest was new and clean, though small bits of green moss drifted down to settle on the warm gray floor around Darkfire. She flexed her claws with a sigh, flexing her shoulders and rising to her paws. The den was dark, the only light the faint golden glow that trickled in from the skylight in the larger cave outside. The sound of chattering voices drifted to Darkfire's ears, and she glanced at Nightpaw questioningly.

"It's Crowsight's Medicine Cat ceremony," he said cheerfully, flicking his tail. "I came to wake you 'cause I didn't think you'd want to miss it!" Darkfire took another deep breath, nodding slowly.

"Yeah," she said, glancing at her paws. For a second, dark claws sprang from the ground to wrap around them. For another second after, they were stained in scarlet blood. Darkfire forced her gaze away with an uneasy smile at Nightpaw. "Yeah. Thanks."

"No problem!" the tom responded cheerfully before whirling to bounce back down the narrow passageway. Darkfire watched him go for a second, her paws holding her in place. Finally, she moved from her nest to duck her head and slip after Nightpaw.

Darkfire pushed her way into the main cave, feeling the golden light trace her face and squinting briefly before the world came into focus. Cats were gathered around the gem-inlaid rock, chattering and laughing cheerfully with one another. Dark shadows waited patiently at the edges of the open cavern, contrasting strongly with the warm golden light from outside. A glimpse of sapphire sky could be seen through the skylight, pale clouds meandering across the dome-like surface.

Upon the rock, Opalstar was already sitting, her multicolored eyes gleaming in the sunlight. Lightspot lay at the base of the stone, eyes half-closed and chin resting on her forepaws.

Opalstar glanced over in Darkfire's direction as the she-cat sat down

politely a little ways away from the rest of the Clan, and the leader gave a near-imperceptible nod.

Darkfire dipped her head back before turning her attention back to the rest of the Clan, watching them idly as she waited for the ceremony to begin.

"Hey! Good morning, Darkfire!" said a spotted light-brown she-cat as she trotted up to Darkfire, dark green eyes glowing cheerfully. "Did you sleep well?"

Darkfire blinked, and for a brief moment, Leopardstrike stood in place of the she-cat, smiling broadly at Darkfire. But then the image faded, and Darkfire sighed lightly.

"Fine," she said. "Had some nightmares, though." The she-cat frowned sympathetically, pacing to sit next to Darkfire. "How did you sleep, Starlingsong?"

Starlingsong shrugged. "Meh. I'm super excited for Crowpaw's ceremony though! He's been antsy since I and the rest got our warrior names. He says it's not fair, since he's *technically* the second oldest, but whatever, I guess." Darkfire smirked.

"I'm sure that must be infuriating."

"Not for long," Starlingsong said, curling her tail over her paws and pricking her ears. "It looks like it's starting."

Opalstar had risen to her paws, leaning forward in the early sunlight. She surveyed her Clan cooly, waiting patiently until the buzzing chatter died down and StormClan waited silently for her to speak.

"May all cats old enough to be fearless and strong in battle gather around the Jewlelstone!" She called out through the cavern, but every cat had been gathered there already. They stirred and murmured, eyes glittering with excitement. Opalstar paused, dipping her head to the two medicine cats from earlier, Streamspeckle and Featherclaw. "Our respected medicine cats will be conducting this ceremony."

The two she-cats rose to their paws, sliding over to stand atop the rock, Opalstar moving respectfully out of their way.

"Today," called Streamspeckle, the older of the two. "We find ourselves in possession of a medicine apprentice who has proven themselves worthy of the position of medicine cat. I, Streamspeckle, and my accomplice, Featherclaw, call upon our warrior ancestors to look down at this young apprentice." Crowpaw slipped forward from the crowd, ears pricked nervously and tail flicking from side to side. Darkfire could see the nervous glitter in his eyes from where she was sitting, and she willed her strength to fill his steps with more courage. "He has trained hard to learn the ways of a medicine cat," Streamspeckle continued, pale fur rippling, "and with your help, he will serve StormClan for many moons to come. Crowpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from the rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your own life?"

"I do," came Crowpaw's voice, trembling but with an odd sort of strength that carried his voice across the cavern and to the twitching ears of the cats hidden by shadows near the back.

"Then by the powers of the Dark Ones, the Light Ones, the Watchers, and all other members of StarClan, I give you your medicine cat name. Crowpaw, from now until you join the ranks of our ancestors, you will be known as Crowsight. StarClan honors your kindness and spiritual connection, and we welcome you as a full member of StormClan."

Cheers rumbled from the surrounding cats, their voices lifted in praise.

"Crowsight! Crowsight!"

Streamspeckle dipped her head to Featherclaw, and the pair leaped from the gem-speckled rock and padded over to Crowsight. Each rested their muzzle on his head in their turn before stepping back, gazing at him with evident pride in their gaze. Darkfire grinned, glancing over at Starlingsong.

"Let's go congratulate him," she purred, and Starlingsong nodded

lightly.

The two she-cats padded over to where Crowsight was standing, looking embarrassed and prideful as he was swarmed with compliments from his Clanmates. As Darkfire slipped between the StormClan cats, she felt oddly at home. Some cats paused to look at her, but there wasn't any suspicion or anger in their eyes. Nor was there disappointment or distrust. There was only mild confusion before their faces shifted into that of acceptance. They accepted her. StormClan accepted her.

Darkfire couldn't hold the smile that played across her face as she reached Crowsight. The dark brown tom's eyes lit up as she approached.

"Congratulations, Crowsight!" she cheered, and Crowsight gave a hesitant purr. Starlingsong rushed forward to rub her cheek against his face.

"You're finally a medicine cat!" she exclaimed, and he laughed happily.

It was a few moments before the Clan fully dispersed, disappearing into dens or retreating back to the shadowy corners of the cavern. Opalstar had taken her place back on the rock and was now seeming to finish a brief conversation with Lightspot.

"Come on, Crowsight," Featherclaw meowed. "Winter is on the horizon. It's best we get working on the herb storage. We could get a snowstorm any day now."

Crowsight nodded, waving a short goodbye to Darkfire with his tail. Meanwhile, Lightspot had begun to speak.

"May all able cats gather around for patrols!" she called out, and a few shapes slipped forward to wait patiently around her. Darkfire hesitated before Lightspot glanced in her direction.

"You too," she said, and Darkfire felt a brief surge of happiness rise in her chest. She strode confidently forward, where the cats politely parted around her to make a space for her to sit among them.

"I want Doveflare, Russetpelt, Rosefoot, and Burntsky on a hunting patrol. The GustClan border, if you will. I want a different hunting patrol of Gingerstripe, Nightpaw, and Lionstep on the opposite border." The mentioned cats rose to their paws, quickly making their way to the tunnel of the cavern. Nightpaw glanced back at Darkfire, shooting her a cheerful glance, and she couldn't help but smile back and watch as they vanished into the darkness. "Then for the border patrol... I want Cloudspot, Sheercliff, and Floodspring. I want you to head to the South-Western edge. To take the East, I want Windclaw, Wrensoar, Starlingsong, and Darkfire."

Darkfire rose to her paws, flicking her tail into the air as the rest of the mentioned cats also stood. She glanced at her patrol mates. She hadn't spoken to Windclaw yet, and she didn't know Wrensoar whatsoever. At least Starlingsong was a familiar face.

But Windclaw seemed fairly friendly as she gave Darkfire a grin and strode ahead, short white pelt fluffing up with excitement. Wrensoar, who was also a pure white she-cat, followed a little more slowly, flecked light brown eyes gleaming. She looked very similar to Windclaw.

"She's our Grandmother," explained Starlingsong, seeming to notice Darkfire's curious gaze.

"Is she related to Nightpaw, by any chance?" she asked, noticing the oddly flecked eyes.

"Yeah, actually. She's his Grandma as well."

"Huh," said Darkfire, following after the rest of the patrol.

"Oh, and she's also mute," Starlingsong added after a moment. "I dunno, I just got used to it. Thought I should tell you, though."

"Yeah," said Darkfire thoughtfully. "Good to know.

The air was crisp and cold. A thin layer of frost skimmed the pale grass, cool gray sunlight pouring in from between the leafless trees. Crystalized blades crunched beneath Darkfire's paws as she followed the rest of the patrol.

Wrensoar had taken the lead with Windclaw striding along just behind her. Darkfire didn't recognize the rocky terrain well, and she had to constantly watch her step, lest she trip in the unfamiliar environment. The last time she had seen StormClan territory was when she was being escorted to their camp, and then she had been only half-conscious and too concentrated on the pain that came with every step to notice where she was putting her paws. Now, she was all too aware of her clumsy maneuvers.

Starlingsong gazed at her sympathetically. "You alright?"

"Yes," Darkfire nearly snapped, but she caught herself. "I mean- Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

Starlingsong nodded, though she still didn't look entirely convinced. The patrol made a sharp turn as they passed a massive root that stuck from the ground and nearly made Darkfire trip. As they moved forward, the dying grass beneath their paws shifted into shifting sands, and the occasional stone that had dotted the landscape now rose from the ground into a sheer cliff.

The patrol veered to follow the edge of the cliff, moving further away from the churning ocean. Darkfire could feel the ache in her paws, unused as her body was to this much walking since her exile from EmberClan. Eventually, they reached the grass again, and the sand and stone shifted away.

"Only a little more ways to go," Windclaw called back to Darkfire, and her fur bristled slightly.

"I could go for days longer," she huffed, but Windclaw only smirked. Darkfire quickened her pace to pad alongside Windclaw's shoulder.

Wrensoar paused suddenly, flicking her tail up to alert the rest of the patrol.

"What's up?" Windclaw asked the mute she-cat. Wrensoar made a complicated flicking motion towards the border, tilting her ears back and kneading her claws into the ground.

"EmberClan patrol," Starlingsong explained to a bemused-looking

Darkfire. "Close by."

Darkfire's stomach dropped. EmberClan. Her old home. Her paws suddenly felt like they were lodged in thick mud. She couldn't breathe as the horrific memories raced back to her. The patrol began to draw further away, but she couldn't bring herself to follow them.

"Darkfire?" Starlingsong said, eyes round with worry. "Are you coming?"

Darkfire forced her stiff legs to carry her forward.

"Fine," she lied in a strained voice. Starlingsong nodded, lightly brushing her tail across Darkfire's shoulders comfortingly.

Moments later, the EmberClan patrol came into view. At the head of it was Leaftrail, pale russet fur fluffed up against the chill. Trailing behind her were Cloudsmoke and Flamesoot, conversing lightly. And behind them...

Darkfire froze as the rest of her patrol slid up against the border, and the EmberClan patrol quickened their pace to meet them.

Darkfire gazed at Leopardstrike, who brought up the rear of the patrol.

"Good day," said Windclaw lightly.

"To you as well," said Leaftrail coldly.

An air of tension settled over the patrol, and Darkfire felt the strange urge to run far, far, far away from all the Clans and all this drama. She felt the gaze of Leopardstrike boring into her pelt, and she felt tears welling up uninvited into her gaze.

She wiped them away, cursing herself for being so overly emotional. She caught Starlingsong gazing at her with concern, which only made things worse.

"We should be going, then," Windclaw said curtly, lifting her chin.

"Right," said Leaftrail, narrowing her eyes. The patrols turned away in silence, and Darkfire felt her pelt prickling all the way back to camp.

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 20

The amber sun glowed dim and warm against the deep shades of gray sky. Translucent clouds drifted delicately over the quiet surface, stained with scarlet and the faintest speckles of cold. The air was still and silent, disturbed only by the distant shift of waves far below. The cliffside was smooth and cold beneath Darkfire's paws, and the she-cat couldn't suppress a shudder as an icy wind trailed past her pelt and sent ripples through her fur. She leaned in closer to Crowsight, who had been sitting beside her.

"It's cold," she murmured, curling her tail around herself. He smiled slightly.

"Yeah," he said. "Winter's just about here." There was another moment of silence between them as they sat, the sun sliding lower into the sky. Far above it, the purple ink of night stained the scarlet, creeping into view as the faintest stars began to glint softly on the far horizon.

A harsh cry echoed across the horizon, and eleven dark shapes swooped into view. The crow's dark wings beat fiercely as they flew alongside the current of the wind, blue-tinted feathers reflecting against the golden sunlight as they banked sharply upward. Harsh cries echoed from their beaks as they danced and dove through the otherwise silent air, fierce wings mastering the wind as a fish's fins would the currents. Darkfire watched, silent, as they completed one more sharp loop before their dark silhouettes vanished behind dark clouds.

"Eleven crows," Crowsight murmured from Darkfire's side. She turned her gaze on the tom and met his eyes, which were round and glittering nervously. "Eleven crows means a surprise. Something's about to happen. Secrets revealed."

Darkfire blinked at him. Figures he'd know a bit about his namesake.

"That's just superstition," she meowed dismissively, flicking her tail. "But I'm curious- What does it mean when you see just one crow?"

Crowsight tilted his head. "That's the easiest one to remember. It means that something super, super bad is about to happen. Some kind of tragedy. Terrible luck."

Darkfire felt sick to her stomach. Unwarranted, her mind flashed back to her last day in EmberClan. Laying motionless on the ground, a single crow had landed before her. She remembered its every shimmering feather. She remembered its dark eyes and its harsh call. Shortly after, she had been sentenced to execution.

Darkfire's breath quickened, and her claws dug into the stone so hard that she felt the tip of one chip, shooting bolts of pain through her. Her vision spun as she tried to regain control, sobs pushing their way up her throat.

Crowsight's forest green eyes widened, and he quickly wrapped his tail around Darkfire and pulled her close.

"Hey, it's okay," he whispered. "You're safe here."

Darkfire's body shook with sorrow, and she was too breathless to respond. There were so many things she wanted to tell him. So much tragedy that she couldn't find the strength to share. She buried her face in his fur and cried harder.

It felt nice if she was honest with herself. She hated showing weakness around others. She hated asking for help. But it was all too much. She had gone through so many things that she didn't want to remember.

She pulled away even as tears still slid down her cheeks. She shook her head a few times, trying to regain control over herself. It was no good to wallow in self-pity.

"Are... you okay?" Crowsight asked hesitantly, reaching out his forepaw to rest on Darkfire's. She couldn't make herself meet his

gaze.

"I miss them," she whispered, her voice trembling and cracking. "I miss them so much."
"Miss who?" Crowsight murmured, his voice lowering.

"Bearpaw," said Darkfire, chest shaking. "Spottedfire. Grayp-"

She couldn't make herself say the name. Even now, just the thought of the bright-eyed young she-cat sent storms of grief barreling through her, the sorrowful thunder rippling through her ears and burning lightning striking her chest over and over again.

Crowsight leaned forward to rest his chin on her shoulder, ears flicking back.

"I'm here for you," he said simply. "It's okay to cry."

Darkfire didn't know how much of her believed him. Even so, his comfort helped, even the tiniest little bit. She leaned back into him, squeezing her eyes shut and waiting for the ocean of guilt to squeeze back into a condensed droplet of water, ever trembling and ready to burst and release every sorrow that Darkfire had known.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"No problem," Crowsight murmured back, though his voice sounded tense.

Both cats pulled away, gazing at each other.

"Are... you okay?" Crowsight asked. Darkfire nodded, even if it wasn't completely truthful.

"We should go back to your Clan," Darkfire murmured.

"Our Clan," Crowsight said reassuringly, and his tail twined itself to interlock with Darkfire's. She moved forward, pressing her forehead into his gently.

"Thank you," she said again. Crowsight didn't need to respond. Slowly, the cats untangled themself, and by the time they were

scaling the steep cliffside, the sky had turned dark, and a nearly full moon had blossomed in the sky.

Darkfire followed the rest of the patrol as they padded forward, pushing their way through thin twisting trees and their paws leaving shallow patterns in the snow. The ground was covered in a glittering sheet of alabaster snow that sparkled in the early light.

The cats padding in front of Darkfire were Sheercliff, Rosefoot, and Doveflare, their paws lightly skimming the surface of the crystal powder.

Darkfire's amber-splashed fur was fluffed up against the relentless wind, and the chilling shocks that ran through her lower legs weren't particularly helping either.

"How much further to camp?" she asked, trying to keep the grumble out of her voice.

"We're almost there," Doveflare confirmed, the senior warrior's voice soft and kind. The white she-cat's eyes were round, flecks of gold accenting her face around them and fluffy fur bushed up similar to Doveflare's. She was the most experienced, yet padded beside Darkfire in the back of the patrol rather than in the front, where Sheercliff was leading the way.

The patrol fell silent once again, the quiet marked with the light crunches as their paws broke past the harder surface of the snow. Then, distant sounds drifted in from the distance. The patrol froze, ears pricking and swiveling for the source of the noise. Loud voices raised in shouts or yowls echoed from nearby.

"Something's wrong," Sheercliff hissed. "Quickly! Get back to camp!" The patrol began to race forward. Darkfires heart pounded ferociously in her chest as her paws skimmed the ground and she flew through the air, the rest of the patrol not far behind. As they approached the cliffside, no cats stood or relaxed atop it. But the yowls and screeches had grown louder.

"The center of camp!" Rosefoot exclaimed. "Hurry!" The cats raced up the cliffside haphazardly, ears flattened to their heads as the

wind seemed to scream around them, propelling them forward with the utmost urgency. They ducked down into the tunnel that led to StormClan, and the screams were loudest here.

Darkfire exploded from the tunnel and was met with battle.

Everywhere she looked, the shadowy corners of the camp were full of battling cats. She hardly had time to take in the scene when heavy paws slammed into her side, and she was flying through the air.

Her spine connected with a rough stone wall and she dropped to the ground like a piece of prey with a gasp. Her eyes flew open and she stumbled to her paws to face her attacker.

Sootysnow stood before her, the EmberClan tom's black and white spotted fur bristling with aggression.

"I always knew you were a traitor," he snarled, before leaping at Darkfire with his claws outstretched.

Instinct took over. Darkfire bunched her muscles and threw herself to the ground, the breath knocked out of her as she slammed against the stone. She heard Sootysnow's distant yelp as he slammed against the wall, and Darkfire darted to her paws, whirling around and her claws raking into his back. Blood sprayed into the air, scarlet dapples falling against the stone.

Sootysnow took in a sharp breath, snarling as he whirled on Darkfire. The she-cat danced back as he leaped towards her, claws outstretched. She ducked to the side, but the blow glanced off her cheek. She felt hot blood begin to trickle through her fur. Sootysnow turned again, golden eyes narrowed and glittering with rage. He leaped towards Darkfire again, and this time, he connected, claws digging so hard into Darkfire's shoulders that it brought tears to her eyes. She stumbled back, but faster than she could blink, the tom had his jaws locked firmly around her throat, slicing into it so hard she couldn't breathe.

Darkfire choked and staggered, throwing herself from side to side in an attempt to dislodge the tom as her vision began to darken. Panic

began to roar through her, clouding her vision and her thoughts. But along with the pain, she also felt anger. No, not anger. Complete and murderous rage.

An ear-splitting screech burst from her throat, and she spun herself so hard that it through Sootysnow off her and spent him twisting through the air to crash into a wall. Darkfire wasted no time as she darted forward, leaping towards Sootysnow. She felt her claws rip across his face before she sprang back. Her vision was clouded by white-hot anger. She had no idea where it had come from, but she'd given everything she had to protect her Clan. She had given her friends, her mental and physical well-being. She had almost given her life. And now she was repaid with her former Clanmates trying to kill her. Darkfire snapped.

Sootysnow hissed fiercely as scarlet blood trickled down his face, but Darkfire leaped forward again, flying through the air. She would show them a traitor.

Her claws raked through Sootysnow's pelt again and again. Hot blood made the cavern floor slick and hot. He staggered on his paws, hollow breath rattling weakly in his chest. His fur was stained red with blood. Darkfire kept going, her claws flashing in and out of sight. She couldn't think, she couldn't feel. Nothing was real at that moment. She didn't see Sootysnow as a cat. She saw him as everything that had taken her life away from her.

Finally, she lunged forward one last time, snapping her jaws around her throat. She felt him claw weakly at her as he writhed and struggled to break free, but Darkfire slammed him to the ground. She gripped tighter and tighter, unable to breathe through the thick blood that filled her mouth, tainted with iron and hot against her tongue. It was only once Sootysnow sagged against her that she released him, spitting scarlet blood from her mouth. Her breath heaved as she stepped back from her fallen enemy. Then her vision cleared, and Darkfire saw what she'd done.

The she-cat stumbled back, eyes round with horror. Sootysnow's body was mangled and torn, hardly recognizable as the cat he had once been. Nausea swept over Darkfire, and she swayed on her paws. Sootysnow's mouth was stretched wide in a silent scream, and

his eyes were hollow and glazed with terror. Darkfire shook her head, vision swimming.

What have I done?

A brief second passed where Darkfire stood alone amidst the chaos, the battle raging on around her. But she had done it. She had murdurered her former Clanmate. And for what? It was never his fault that Brightgleam's twisted words had wrapped their iron grip around him. It had never been his fault. And she had murdered him. No, not just murdered. She had mangled him and inflicted as much pain as she could until the very last heartbeats of the cat's life.

She was a monster.

Darkfire couldn't move, horror locking her body in place. She couldn't think clearly, couldn't process what had just happened. But she didn't need to. Seconds later, another weight slammed into her side.

Darkfire's head cracked against the ground, splitting pain shooting through her skull. Through her fuzzy vision, she couldn't see anything. Then her sight cleared, and she saw the cat that stood over her.

"L- Leopardstrike?" she whispered, her voice hoarse, but a yelp forced its way out of her as Leopardstrike slashed a claw over Darkfire's face.

Blinded by blood, the only aspect of her former friend's expression that Darkfire could make out was horror. Horror, and pure, untamed rage.

"You monster!" the she-cat screamed, and Darkfire screeched as she felt razor claws rake into her flesh, going so deep that they rang against her bone. Her heart pounded and she couldn't breathe. "You killed them! You killed my siblings! You killed Sootysnow! You killed your own mentor!" More pain. "And now I'll rip you to pieces! I'll make you regret everything you ever did!"

Darkfire wanted to cry out. She wanted to scream to Leopardstrike that everything she ever did was to protect her. But she couldn't move. Instead of words, only a muffled gurgling came from Darkfire's mouth. She couldn't move. The pain was blinding, worse than anything Darkfire had ever felt. She couldn't concentrate. The world swayed in and out of focus.

Everything had fallen far away, now. The pain was distant. Darkfire felt far away from herself now. She drifted gently through a black ocean. She heard everything distantly, muffled like she was underwater. Stars began to flicker to life around her.

I'm dying, Darkfire thought, though no panic seized her. There was only peace. *Is this StarClan*?

She couldn't breathe anymore. Her eyes had gone black, but the definite shapes of stars had burned to life around her. She closed her eyes, ready to move on.

Darkfire opened her eyes.

The battle still raged on. Everything still hurt as blinding agony continued to thunder through her. But Leoaprdstrike was no longer standing over her. Instead, it was Crowsight, his narrow face twisted into an expression of fury that was nothing like him. But he wasn't glaring at Darkfire.

"Get out of here!" he snarled, his voice like muffled thunder, drifting in and out of focus. Darkfire could barely see the shape of Leoaprdstrike standing nearby, a trickle of blood tracing her throat. Crowsight took a step forward, and Leopardstrike disappeared.

Crowsight's gaze turned to Darkfire, round and gentle. "Darkfire?" he asked, voice panicked. Darkfire wanted to reach out to him, to call that she was okay, but she couldn't move. Her body disobeyed her. She felt herself drifting away again. The stars sang in her ears, pulling her towards them.

"Don't die on me," Crowsight said, his voice barely a whimper. "I won't let you."

"I won't let you."

Darkfire's eyes shut. Darkness flooded her vision. She let out a breath.

When Darkfire awoke, she was standing in a field of stars.

The odd wind swirled around her, though this wasn't the wind she was used to. Colors drifted on it, flitting in and out of sight as they swirled around Darkfire. Surrounding her was a swirling colorless shade that Darkfire couldn't since describe. When she moved forward at last, there was a faint tingling sound where she accidentally bumped into glittering stars.

"Is... anyone there?" she called out, voice rising against the silence. Her own voice echoed around her, and her eyes grew round with wonder as her voice solidified into shades of deep green and bright blue as they joined the wind. They danced around her, ruffling her fur lightly before they dipped down and vanished into the darkness.

Darkfire's breath caught in her throat. Where was she?

Her gaze flicked to her paws, and she immediately stumbled back, eyes widening. She didn't *have* paws.

Her eyes darted from side to side, panic racing through her mind. Confusion clouded her thoughts. Did she even have a brain?

"Hello, Darkfire."

Darkfire swiveled around shakily, eyes round and fearful. Standing behind her was the gentle figure of a cat, narrow eyes glowing a pure color that Darkfire couldn't name. The pelt of the cat was translucent, a ghostly pale shade of white. Faint tabby stripes streaked its pelt, and long ghostly fur rippled in the odd breeze.

"Where am I?" Darkfire's voice was strange too. It tinkled like the stars and shifted unnaturally, and all the emotion and questions she couldn't voice were carried in her tone. Just as it had before, her words echoed briefly before twisting into colors- the same as before. "Am I in StarClan?"

The cat's face remained an expressionless veil. "You are in the Waiting Grounds."

"The...?"

"It is where cats go when they are waiting to be escorted to StarClan. You are a spirit."

Panic began to thrum through Darkfire. "But- I- Am I *dead*?" Her last word came out as a muffled whisper. The cat tilted its head slightly.

"Not yet," it said simply. Darkfire hesitated.

"Why am I here?"

"We need to deliver a prophecy," the cat said, drifting gently forward. "And warn you."

Darkfire took in a deep breath. "Go on, then."

"Your sister is leader, now," the cat said softly, voice lowering.

"My sister- she's what?" Darkfire's memory was foggy. She had a sister? The cat ignored the question.

"Remember the prophecy," it said. Darkfire opened her mouth to interrupt, but the cat had already begun.

"In dimming embers, the fiery cat

must be unafraid of the hidden wrath.

In the raging storm, the bird must fly,

for if it should fall, the peace will die.

Hidden within howling gusts,

claws of ground deserve no trust.

A mountain will stand, silent and strong,

as pounding rain is hidden by fog.

And when the final light should shine,

to bring the peace, the darkness must die."

Darkfire was stunned into silence for a moment.

"I don't understand," she said softly. "Could you please explain-"

"Our time here is waning," the ghost cat said, eyes narrowing. "They are on their way."

"Who is on their way?" Darkfire's voice rose. "Tell me-"

"Wake up."

.~ End of Book One ~.